

Sacred Landscape: Unveiling the Changing Contours of Indigenous Beliefs in Select Himachali Short Stories

Gitanjali Mahendra*

Abstract

The Pahari community residing in the abode of the Gods, Himachal Pradesh, known as 'Dev Bhoomi', has its local deities called Devi and Devta. These deities are believed to be manifestations of Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh, originating from the very roots of nature. The Devi/Devta hold strong dominance over the Pahari community, governing their social customs, activities, and destinies. It is believed that the Gods control their lives, and what they say cannot be disobeyed at any cost. The religious beliefs that play a central role in the community also impart livelihood to the Pahari people. However, the impact of new knowledge, personal experiences, and liberal attitudes has led to changes in indigenous beliefs among the Pahari people. This paper attempts to study two Himachali short stories, "Legacies" by Ratan S. Himesh and "Manglachari" by Sunder Lohia, translated by Prof. Meenakshi F. Paul in *Short Stories of Himachal Pradesh* (2007). These stories capture the linkages between resident deities and their underlying impact on the socio-cultural fabric of the region. The paper aims to unveil the aspects of the governing power of the Devi/Devta and their relevance in contemporary times. Both stories illustrate the mystical nature of the control of Devtas, which plays a pivotal role in influencing the lives of the residents. The Devta communicates through the medium of a devised oracle, the gur. The stories highlight the ancient belief system of the Himalayan state.

Keywords: *Devi/devta, Resident deities, Religious Beliefs, Belief System, Gur.*

Introduction

The Devi/Devta system traces its origin back to the Rigvedic period (1500-1000 BC). They are considered divine manifestations of Gods, with each region having its deity, the guardian who oversees local affairs. A village Devi/Devta is regarded as the ruler who owns the land, and people conduct their lives according to the Devi/Devta's will, seeking consent from the presiding deity before undertaking any task (Malhotra 2010). An intricate system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and folklore is practised by the Pahari community, contributing to biases and rigidities associated with these practices and belief systems. The community has established a close relationship with the divine power by either controlling or overpowering the spirit through enchantments or techniques, channelling the power for good or bad, and acquiring desired objects (Lowie 176). The short stories set in Himachal reflect the deep-rooted belief system associated with the Devta institution, both in faith and practice.

As stated by B.R Sharma, the institution of the Devi / Devtas has not come up suddenly; it has a long tradition, and one cannot ascertain when it emerged.

"The village Gods control all the villagers and direct social customs. When this custom of village deities started is not known for certain, but the villagers know only that their activities and destinies are governed by these Gods and they cannot afford to disobey them at any cost. Thus, it can be safely said that this institution is the major dictator of their activities, hopes and despairs, virtues, and vices, natural and created misfortunes in a village society. The village God is a symbol of village culture". (Sharma 33)

Numerous writers from Himachal Pradesh, such as S.R. Harnot, Sunder Lohia, Piyuh Guleri, Naresh Pandit, Tulsi Raman, Sadhu Ram Darshak, Suhil Kumar Phull, and

* Associate Professor, Department of English, St. Bede's College, Shimla. Can be reached at gitanjali.mahendra@gmail.com

Badri Singh Bhatia, write in Pahari and Hindi languages. This paper aims to establish the intertwining of the Devta influence with the socio-cultural fabric of the region in the two stories. The narratives mirror the folk beliefs that constitute the rituals, legends, and myths of the society. The ceremonies associated with the Devi/Devta conform to the collective consciousness of the people. As B.L. Kapoor notes, "The culture is somewhat mysterious. It is difficult to expose all its layers and decode their meanings" (Kapoor 64).

Myths reflect cultural values and beliefs and are concerned with the motives that underlie human behaviour. This approach of studying the mythological and archetypal critical approaches allows for an examination of how ancient myths and beliefs shape contemporary narratives, particularly in the context of the Pahari community's relationship with their deities. Myths serve as a lens through which we can understand the characters' motivations, societal norms, and the overarching themes of fate, divine intervention, and human agency. As Mark Schorer says, "Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend". (Schorer 29)

In the context of the stories "Manglachari" and "Legacies," it is revealed how the Devi/Devta system functions as both a source of guidance and a mechanism of control. The narratives illustrate the duality of these myths, where the divine is both a protector and a potential oppressor, shaping the lives of individuals within the community.

"Manglachari"

The author of the story "Maglachari" is Prof. Sunder Lohia, born in the year 1933. He is a renowned short story writer and poet. His works are regularly published in noted Hindi magazines of India, *Sarika*, *Saptahik*, *Hindustan* and *Hans*, and his works have also been translated into Marathi, Gujarati, and Punjabi. He has authored 'Nai Kahani', a book of short stories and a book of poems, 'Ek Asiwkar'.

The story "Manglachari" is rich with mythological elements that emphasise the cultural significance of the Devi/Devta system. Trinal Mahadev is the protective deity, while the *gur* serves as the intermediary between the divine and the mortal realm. This relationship symbolises the broader mythological framework in which the Pahari community operates, where the divine is intricately woven into the fabric of daily life.

The story unfolds in the sacred realm of the Trinal Mahadev temple, where the deity resides, and a vibrant

fair is held every spring. This annual celebration draws the community together, with folk dances and lively performances filling the open courtyard, where the air is alive with the sounds of traditional instruments. As Singh notes, "Like all hill people, the inhabitants of Himachal Pradesh have to put in a bitter struggle to make their living, and like all hill people, they forget their hard life in laughter and songs" (Singh 45)

Among the performers are two close friends, Phuhnu and Runiya, who play the shehnai and nagara, the kettle drum, with infectious enthusiasm, embodying the spirit of the festival as true *manglacharis*. Phuhnu, obsessed with thoughts of the fair, composes new melodies and rehearses them months in advance.

Phuhnu's life takes a tragic turn when his beloved wife, Rukmo, falls gravely ill. Overwhelmed by grief, he finds himself unable to play the shehnai, the instrument that once brought him joy. In his darkest hour, Runiya encourages him to attend the fair, believing that the Devta would be displeased if they did not honour the tradition. Runiya insists that the Devta, whom Phuhnu has faithfully served throughout his life, would surely lend his divine assistance and perhaps even cure Rukmo.

"Right from the origin or manifestation of a particular god or goddess, the *gur* (medium) or the interpreter of the Devta, relates the whole story with his supernatural powers, miracles and capability of curses inflicted by him, from time to time. The medium, while in trance and possession by the spirit, turns out to be an oracle or God himself. Whatever he utters in the state of trance is believed to be the assertion of God himself". (Sharma 13).

Rukmo, too, expresses her desire for Phuhnu to seek counsel of the *gur*, hoping for a remedy to her suffering. When Phuhnu approaches the *gur*, he receives a glimmer of hope: "Listen, Manglachari! The planets are currently inauspicious for your wife. Take this holy thread and water. She will recover in fifteen days. Go, this is my blessing". Phuhnu clings to this promise, convinced that his unwavering devotion to the Devta will yield a miracle.

The *gur* provides Phuhnu with an auspicious thread and water, assuring him of her recovery in fifteen days. When he returns home, he follows the *gur*'s instructions and gives Rukmo the auspicious thread and water. The next morning, he finds her dead, and his faith in the Devta is shattered. A wave of resentment washes over him as he grapples with the betrayal of his faith: "What had become of her faith? What return had I received for my years of service?" (Lohia 58)

The following year, Phuhnu returns to the mela, but the joy of the festival eludes him. He cannot bring himself to play the shehnai, leaving it turned upside down, a symbol of his broken spirit. When the temple steward

urges him to perform, Phuhnu's indifference is palpable. "How did the blessing given to me turn into a curse?" he laments. "He could not even keep His promise for fifteen days. At least ask Him... What wrong did I" (Lohia 61)

Phuhnu was becoming restless, he wanted to know what wrong he had done that the Devta cursed him and he lost his wife. He was told by the *bhandari* that birth and death do happen. His words of wisdom could not console Phuhnu; he refused to play the shehnai. The cultural practice of showing temporary empathy fades when personal duty is not fulfilled. The crowd is unsympathetic; they thrash him and demand that Phuhnu leave, declaring that one who does not serve the Devta has no place in the temple. Runiya, steadfast in his loyalty to his friend, refuses to play the nagara without Phuhnu's shehnai, stating, "The nagara is dumb without the shehnai, master. I won't play". (Lohia 62)

When Runiya supports Phuhnu, the bond of friendship shines brighter than any divine promise, reminding them both that human connection can often provide solace where faith falters. As they descend the slope, Phuhnu turns to Runiya, gratitude mingling with sorrow in his voice. "Runiya, you saved my honour today. A man is better than the Devta; at least he understands the anguish of a person". (Lohia 62). His statement effectively captures the essence of the narrative's critique of divine authority, highlighting a significant shift towards prioritising human connection and empathy over unquestioning faith. In the story, the Devta, once a symbol of comfort and guidance for Phuhnu, transforms into a source of disillusionment and conflict. This evolution highlights the complexities of faith and the often-painful realities of the human experience.

Phuhnu's journey illustrates the struggle between adhering to tradition and seeking his friend's support in the face of suffering. His unwavering devotion to the Devta, which once provided him with a sense of purpose, ultimately leads to profound disappointment when his faith does not yield the expected solace or healing for his wife. This disillusionment prompts him to reconsider the nature of his beliefs and the role of divine authority in his life.

The narrative poignantly reflects the tension between established traditions and the individual's quest for understanding and connection. Phuhnu's reliance on the Devta for healing reflects the deep-rooted belief in divine intervention. His despair after his wife's death and the inability to question the Devta highlight the emotional weight of these myths. As Phuhnu grapples with his grief and resentment, he finds solace not in the divine but in the unwavering support of his friend Runiya. This shift emphasises the importance of human relationships and the shared understanding of pain.

"Man is at present at the juncture when he is looking at myths, rituals and folklore with a confused vision: accepting their worth yet refusing to see rationality behind them". (Bande 177)

"Legacies"

Ratan S. Himesh is a renowned satirist, short-story writer, and playwright. He writes columns under the pseudonym "Thagde Da Ragda". He has five short story collections and twelve plays to his credit.

In the story "Legacies" by Ratan S. Himesh, Sumana narrates the myth of how Kumla Devta was stealing trees from the gardens of Bishala Devta. Upon discovering the theft, Bishala Devta rained down hailstones on Kumla Devta, resulting in a cut nose. The idol of Kumla Devta bears this mark, and attempts by a goldsmith to fix it are futile. The narrator recalls hearing this story as a child, noting the physical evidence of the tale in the landscape.

"For Proof, there were these umbrella-shaped trees and rocks pockmarked with iron hailstones. And also, the Devta with his nose missing. There was no room for any doubt. Still, I never did believe this tale". (Himesh 134).

The narrator's first encounter with Sumana, a married woman, occurs when she is tending to her animals in the forest. He observes her struggling to separate two bulls that are fighting—one belonging to him and the other to her. This moment is charged with nostalgia, as he reflects on having seen her as a child when she married at the tender age of ten or twelve. In his attempt to break up the fight, he injures his hand with a stick, a physical manifestation of the emotional turmoil that will unfold between them. Their subsequent meetings spark a rare vitality in their connection, hinting at the deep bond that has formed over the years.

The arrival of the Kariyala troop brings a festive atmosphere to the village, but for Sumana, it is a source of dread. Accompanied by her husband, Narayan Das, she wears an expression of fear. When Narayan falls asleep during the performance, Sumana urgently warns the author, "These people have come to attack you; they will kill you". (Himesh 140). Recognising the gravity of her warning, the author decides to leave to address the situation. It becomes clear that Narayan Das has been abusive, having thrashed Sumana to the point where she could barely move. This incident propels her to leave him, returning to her parents' home with a determination never to return.

As Sumana and the author grow closer, they begin to contemplate their future together. "Listen, have you ever considered what will become of us?" the author asks, filled with hope. However, Sumana's heart is heavy with the weight of tradition and societal expectations. She

expresses her fears about their potential union, stating, "How could a girl from Kumla Devta's area ever become part of your home? It would bring ruin to the family. Destruction and catastrophe would follow". (Himesh 142). Despite having divorced Narayan Das, Sumana feels trapped by the cultural boundaries that define her existence. "You don't understand", she insists. "Bishla Devta will never accept me in his area. Then what will I gain from marrying you?" (Himesh 142). The author's attempts to persuade her are met with resistance, as Sumana conveys the profound stigma she carries. "I would never marry anyone", she declares, "I have the stigma of your name branded on my forehead and your image engraved in my heart". (Himesh 142)

The Devtas pose an obstacle to their union, as Sumana fears the consequences of offending the deity. The narrator argues that her decision is based on superstition, highlighting the tension between personal desire and adherence to traditional beliefs. The story illustrates how folklore remains a dynamic dialogue with life, reflecting the collective memory of society.

"Folklore is not only a continuous process of creation, it remains in a dynamic dialogic relationship with life, with the past and the present, and becomes the projection of the innermost recesses of the social psyche, representing the collective memory of the whole society". (Bande 36).

Sumana's ultimate decision not to marry the narrator, despite her feelings, shows the power of tradition and the fear of divine retribution, illustrating the complexities of navigating personal desires within the constraints of cultural expectations.

The myth of the Kumla and Bishala Devtas serves as a backdrop for the characters' struggles, emphasising how deeply ingrained beliefs can dictate personal relationships and societal norms. The narrative suggests that while these myths provide a framework for understanding the world, they can also impose limitations on an individual's happiness.

The story employs various mythological elements that highlight the cultural significance of the Devi/Devta system. The conflict between Kumla and Bishala Devtas serves as a metaphor for the rivalries and tensions that exist within the community. This mythological backdrop not only enriches the narrative but also reinforces the idea that the divine is intricately linked to the social fabric of the Pahari people. In his book *The Divine Heads*, B.R. Sharma points out:

"The myths relating to folk beliefs, folk tales, rituals, and village gods provide essential data for interpretations of the social mind of a particular society. The primitive myths are not isolated in their character and have a definite bearing on the lifestyle of the people where these are prevalent". (Sharma 91)

The physical scars on the idol of Kumla Devta symbolise the lasting impact of divine conflict on the community. This motif of scars as a representation of unresolved tensions is a common theme in mythology, where the past continues to influence the present. Sumana's struggle to reconcile her feelings for the narrator with her fear of divine retribution reflects the broader theme of individual desires clashing with societal expectations, a recurring motif in mythological narratives.

As the Pahari community navigates the complexities of modernity, the stories reveal a gradual shift in the perception of the Devi/Devta. While the reverence for these deities remains, there is an emerging dialogue that questions their omnipotence and the rigid structures of belief that have governed the community for centuries. The characters in these narratives embody this struggle, reflecting a broader societal shift towards individualism and critical thinking.

The Changing Contours of Indigenous Beliefs

In "Manglachari," Phuhnu's disillusionment with the Devta after his wife's death signifies a turning point in his relationship with the divine. His desire to question the Devta's authority marks a departure from traditional beliefs, suggesting that the community is beginning to grapple with the limitations of faith in the face of personal tragedy. This shift is indicative of a larger trend within the Pahari community, where the younger generation is increasingly influenced by modern ideologies and scientific reasoning.

Similarly, Sumana's internal conflict in "Legacies" highlights the tension between personal desires and the constraints imposed by tradition. Her decision to forgo love for the sake of appeasing the deity reveals the deep-rooted fear of divine retribution that permeates the community. This fear is not merely a relic of the past but continues to shape the lives of individuals, dictating their choices and actions. Through this narrative, Himesh delves into themes of love, tradition, and identity, illustrating the complexities faced by individuals caught between their desires and societal constraints. Sumana's struggle reflects the harsh realities of cultural expectations, leaving her torn between her feelings for the author and the fear of the repercussions that their union might bring. Their relationship, filled with longing and unfulfilled potential, serves as a powerful reminder of the challenges that arise when love confronts the weight of legacy and tradition.

The impact of education and exposure to new ideas plays a significant role in shaping the beliefs of the Pahari community. As the younger generation becomes more educated, they are increasingly questioning the validity of traditional beliefs and practices. This shift is evident in

the narratives of "Manglachari" and "Legacies," where characters grapple with the implications of their faith in the face of modern realities.

Phuhnu's struggle with the Devta's authority reflects a growing scepticism towards established religious practices. His desire to question the Devta's decisions signifies a departure from blind faith, suggesting that the community is beginning to embrace a more critical approach to their beliefs. This scepticism is further emphasised by Runiya's support for Phunnu, indicating a shift towards valuing human empathy and understanding over divine authority.

In "Legacies," Sumana's internal conflict regarding her marriage to the narrator highlights the clash between personal desires and societal expectations rooted in ancient beliefs. The fear of divine retribution serves as a metaphor for the constraints imposed by tradition, illustrating how postcolonial societies often navigate the complexities of identity and belief in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusion

The exploration of indigenous beliefs in Himachali short stories reveals a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. The narratives of "Manglachari" and "Legacies" not only preserve the rich cultural heritage of the Pahari community but also serve as a commentary on the evolving nature of belief systems in the face of changing societal values. As the community grapples

with the implications of new knowledge and experiences, the sacred landscape of Himachal Pradesh continues to transform, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of its people. The stories ultimately invite readers to reflect on the complexities of faith, identity, and the human experience and relationships in a rapidly changing world.

References

- Bande, Usha. *Folk Traditions and Ecology in Himachal Pradesh*. Indus Publishing Company, 2006.
- Himesh, Ratan S. "Legacies." *Short Stories of Himachal Pradesh*, translated by Meenakshi F. Paul, Indus Publishing Company, 2007, pp. 133–43.
- Sharma, B. R. *Gods of Himachal Pradesh*, Indus Publishing Company, 2007.
- Sharma, B. R. *Divine Heads*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2015.
- Kapoor, B.L. *Gods of the High Hills*. Aravali Books International, 2001.
- Lohia, Sunder. "Manglachari." *Short Stories of Himachal Pradesh*, Indus Publishing Company, 2007, pp. 54–62.
- Lowie, Robert H. *The Culture of the Pahari People*. Columbia UP, 1950.
- Malhotra, Anu. *Shamans of the Himalayas*. Himachal Pradesh Research Institute, 2010.
- Paul, Meenakshi. F. *Short Stories of Himachal Pradesh*. Translated by Meenakshi F. Paul, Indus Publishing Company, 2007.
- Shorer, Mark. *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*. Holt, 1946.
- Singh, K. S. *Peoples of India, Himachal Pradesh*, Volume XXIV, Indus Publishing Company, 1996.