

Dogra Culture: Knowledge and Beliefs

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Abstract

'Duggar Pradesh' or the land of the Dogras is the native land of renowned warriors and artists. Politically, this region is called the Jammu division of Jammu and Kashmir. Culture has played a significant role in human evolution, and every society has its own particular culture or socio-cultural system. The Dogra culture is a secular one, comprising of various castes and tribes. It is very interesting to note that a good number of beliefs, concerning every sphere of life, can be seen in Dogra folklore. These beliefs denote a practical form of knowledge regarding society, interpersonal relationship, parenting, agriculture, business, trade, service, weather, seasons, health, medicines and so on. In the present paper an attempt has been made to discuss the knowledge depicted in the folk beliefs prevalent in the Dogra society. For convenient sake only the beliefs related to agriculture and health are analysed here.

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'Duggar Pradesh' or the land of the Dogras is the native land of renowned warriors and artists. Politically, this region is called the Jammu division of Jammu and Kashmir. This region is bounded on the North by the Pir Panjal range of the middle Himalayas, on the South by Punjab, on the East by Ladakh and on the West by Pakistan. The Dogras also live in the adjoining areas of Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and North-eastern Pakistan. They have their own language, Dogri, which was included in the 8th Schedule of the constitution of India in 2003.

The Dogra culture is a secular culture comprising of various castes and tribes of the people of 'Duggar Pradesh'. People belonging to various tribes came here, got settled and established their own power centres in certain areas of this land. In the beginning, they had different life style as well as traditions. However, when people came together and had exchange of rituals and thoughts, it became difficult to differentiate which caste/tribe had influenced the life-style of the other. Sociologically, it is the land of nomadic tribes.

Culture has played a crucial role in human evolution. Every society has its own particular culture or socio-cultural system consisting of language, ideas, customs,

taboos, codes, works of art, rituals, ceremonies, symbols, beliefs etc., and Dogra culture is no exception. It is very interesting to note that a good number of beliefs, concerning every sphere of life, can be seen in Dogra folklore. These beliefs denote a practical form of knowledge regarding society, interpersonal relationship, parenting, agriculture, business, trade, service, weather, seasons, health, medicines so on. In the present paper an attempt has been made to discuss the knowledge depicted in folk beliefs prevalent in the Dogra society. Since it is a very vast area, to make it manageable, only the beliefs related to agriculture and health have been analysed here.

The social and cultural life to a great extent depends upon the economic conditions of the people. Economically, this is a land of agriculturists, soldiers and traders. The economy of the region was based mainly on agriculture. Geographical conditions of the region play an important role in agriculture. The Dogra region is situated in lower Himalayan ranges and has three belts – the hilly, plain and rocky terrain. The people mostly depend on rain and oxen for cultivation. These two factors play an important role in this region. Knowledge and beliefs regarding agriculture, yield, rain and oxen are prevalent among the people of this region. Because of the uncertainty of the yield of crops, the people make predictions, on the basis of experience, the prospects of a good crop or famine. Their assumption is mainly based on rain, direction of wind etc.

The ancient people tried to understand the weather by observing natural elements around them such as the direction of the wind, colour and thickness of clouds and made guesses about the future of crops. Such guesses sometimes came true, but at times may have been wrong too. However, such beliefs in the Dogra oral tradition confirms the use of them as source of knowledge, and these serve as a ready handbook of information and knowledge even now in the rural areas. The following sayings and proverbs by the Dogras show their knowledge and beliefs regarding land, wind, rain, crop etc.

For cultivation, the land is the base and yield depends on the fertility of land. To start the process of farming, one has to choose a fertile land and the question arises how to test it? In the absence of any scientific techniques for testing the land for cultivation, the people have evolved their own technique by observing the kind and growth of grass. It is thought that if there is Bermuda grass, then it is believed that the crop will be good. If it has Papyrus Sedge, then the crop will be weak and if the land is barren and stony, the labour will bear no fruit. This belief has been illustrated in the following saying:

*Jis Paili Khabbal, Utthai Fasal Abbal,
Jis Paili Deela, Utthai Fasal Peela
Jis Paili Rode, Utthai Fasal Chaur*

The land where there is Bermuda grass,
the crop will surely be excellent there

The land where there is Papyrus Sedge,
crop will be pale and weak
If the land is stony, means no yield.

The technology employed by the people of Duggar Pradesh in agriculture is not very advanced. Even today the people of villages adhere more to traditional knowledge and means of farming. Since the main operations of farming are ploughing, sowing, irrigating, harvesting etc., we shall consider all. For ploughing, the first and foremost requirement is oxen. Even now it is almost impossible to plough without oxen in the hilly region. Every ox is not good in ploughing. So it is very essential to identify the right one. There are sayings that provide the knowledge for selecting the ox on the basis of physical characteristics. Regarding the characteristics of a good ox, the following saying provides the local knowledge like in a manual:

*Muttha sing te gitlha kyadi,
khucchen uppar chumbh nuhadi
Gora-Maila laina tadi*

The ox having horns as long as fist
and neck of hand-span,
Tail, touching ankles,
white or of earthy colour must be chosen.

More traditional knowledge for testing the ox can be seen from the following saying:

Daand gahiai, ghora bahiai

Ox must be tested by trying in ploughing
and horse by riding.

Most of the region being hilly and stony, people depends on rain for irrigation and so the yield of the crop. Again people have their own ways to know the commencement of rain. They make predictions by observing the wind, clouds, interpreting the indications provided by lightening and calculating the position of stars, date, month etc. People observe the density of clouds and the direction of wind and give their judgement. In the following saying prediction regarding the weather is very much clear. A man makes his observation on the basis of the colour of clouds and direction of the air and tells his wife that clouds are of the colour of Partridge's wings and eastern wind is blowing so it will surely rain:

*Tittar phangi baddali chalai purai di hava
Bhatta akhai sun Bhattani andar manja daah*

Clouds like the colour of Partridge's wings,
eastern wind is blowing
Husband (Bhatta) says to wife (Bhattani) make bed inside

Similarly, note another saying based on lightening:

*Dakkhan lagai bijali, chalai purav di hava
Bhatta akhai sun Bhattani andar manja daah*

Lightening in the South, eastern wind is blowing
Husband (Bhatta) says to wife (Bhattani) make bed inside

They also make prediction whether it will rain or not, if it does, whether the rain will be good or bad for the crop. According to some beliefs as depicted in sayings, people can calculate the future of crop according to the date, nakshatra, month etc. For example, finding a particular period in a particular month or months enables them to predict that there will be good crop throughout the year. In this regard people say:

*Aunde singhen sir sijjai janden sijjai pittha
Bhatta akhai Bhattani baaranmaah sabikkha*

If it rains during period of the last six days of Shravana and first six days of Bhadrapad, it is a kind of assurance of the prosperity throughout the year. Similarly, if the crop is sown in the seventh month of the Hindu calendar and it rains in eighth month of the Hindu calendar, it is believed that the crop will be good. The following saying illustrates the folk's view:

Barai Magher daanen da dher

On the contrary, if it rains in the seventh month of Hindu calendar, that is interpreted as an indication of famine. People's concern is very much apparent in this saying:

Kattak barai ik rutti daun janen

It rains in the seventh month of the Hindu calendar,
yield will be half.

Sowing is another most important operation in farming. Some traditional knowledge regarding sowing is also carried to the present age through folk beliefs. The knowledge regarding the space between the rows of specific crop has been stored in the following saying:

*Diddha tuaki kaungni, gajjo-gajja kapah
Leph bukkala mariaai Makken bicchen ja*

In this saying it is suggested that to get a good yield pigeon-pea must be sown at the distance of as much as a frog's one and a half jump, one yard space must be left between the rows of cotton plants and the distance between the rows of maize plants should be at least that one could move through with quilt wrapped around.

The prevailing beliefs also suggest as to which crop can get good yield in a particular season. For instance, in the following saying it is said that a good yield from melons can be achieved if it is sown in the second or third month of the Hindu calendar. People say:

Jeth-Haar Kakkari, Akka, Khota, Bakkari

Melon, Swallow-wort plant, donkey and goat flourish
during the months of Jeth and Ashard

As far as threshing is concerned the following saying possesses the knowledge which is true as it is not easy to thresh moist ears of grains.

Ik Jau sille uppara jotar dhille

On one hand barley-ears are moist and another hassle is that oxen are lazy and slow.

Every society has beliefs related to health and medicines, and Dogra society is no exception. They use traditional knowledge to maintain health and curing techniques. Here we will discuss only the folk beliefs concerning health. The following saying illustrates awareness among the folks about the importance of health. Whereas the English say, 'health is wealth' the Dogra folks rates health very high in comparison to wealth as it says that it is universe.

Jinda ai taan jahan ai

If body is free from ailment only then this universe is of
any importance.

It is well acknowledged that good health is a great source of happiness. Even when one possesses much wealth, if his/her health is not good, he/she cannot enjoy peace of mind. To make certain that one possesses a healthy body or not, the following saying suggests that 'if the feet are warm, belly is soft, and the head is cool then that person is healthy and hence no need to see the physician'.

*Pair garam, pet naram, sir thanda
Aavai vaid taan maro danda*

Now consider the question what is necessary for good health? The answer will be pure air, clean water, good food, exercise and proper rest. Yes, this is all what the

indigenous beliefs teach us. This belief speaks in volumes by telling that one should drink filtered water because impure water causes many diseases. The following saying reveals the necessity to purify the water:

Pani peechai puniai, guru banachai chuniai

Water must be filtered before drinking,
Guru must be selected.

Food is fuel for the body. It is said that the health condition mainly depends on what one eats and how many times one eats. Today scientific research has confirmed that most of the leading causes of diseases are preventable, and good health can be gained by improving our life style. Many studies have emphasized the importance of breakfast. It boosts our energy. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. The following saying is based on the wisdom of the indigenous folk that we can stay healthy by taking breakfast.

Badale di nahari, na dukh na bamari

A breakfast in the morning keeps the pain
and disease away.

Mention of a balanced diet in the sayings reflects the knowledge of indigenous people. The following saying reveals that a healthy diet gives our body the right amount of energy, enough raw materials and all that what we need to stay healthy. Good nutrition also provides antioxidants that help keep us feeling young, looking great, and perhaps even disease-free:

*Marad te ghora, khurak thahondi ravai taan kaden buddhe nein
honde*

Man and horse never become old if they get healthy diet.

Avoidance of indigestion is essential for good health and so folk-beliefs instruct to take rest after meals for good digestion. The insight of the folk shows power of their observation and social concerns. One saying can be illustrated here:

Khaiai sei jaana, mariaai nassi jaana

Sleep after meals, run away after beating

Sleep is also essential for an individual's health and well being. Sleep disorder can have profound effects on the health of the person. So the following saying warns people that if someone does not have sleep till the third quarter of night that means that person is suffering from some ailment, though it may be a sleep disorder.

*Paihale paihar te har koi jaagai, dooi jaagai bhogi
Triye paihar koi rogi jaagai, chauthai taaman jogi*

Thus, it seems clear that the indigenous knowledge of the Dogra folk about agriculture and health plays a significant role in their day-to-day life. Even now, the life of Dogras is guided by beliefs and these beliefs serve as a ready to use handbook of knowledge. Their beliefs are not merely ideas the mind possesses; these are the ideas which possess the mind. These beliefs reflect on and are good channels of communicating the worldviews of the Dogra society. This indigenous knowledge can be useful and helpful in many ways.