

Dogri Folk Ballad: Signifier of Social and Cultural Ethos of Dogras

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Abstract

Civil societies across time and space have adopted certain values and ideals upon which it sustains and thrives. These values and ideals, having a universal appeal, for some inexplicable reasons, persist in spite of the apparent impression of their being at discount. However, history is also witness that these ideals have come in conflict with the interests of the ambitious and powerful people in the society who have tried to subvert these basic principles, so essential for the wellbeing of society, for their personal gains. It is also true that there are exceptionally fearless and upright individuals who have risen from time to time to uphold these high ideals and moral values, at the peril of even their own lives. In the difficult and trying times, these legends and their tales become sources of inspiration for the next generations and help keep these principles and ideals alive. The 'Baars' and 'Karakas' – the two categories of folk ballad that are very popular in Dogri – narrate the valour and courage exhibited by warrior heroes, and the sagas of the supreme sacrifices made by individuals who laid down their lives for a moral or social cause.

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From time immemorial, human beings have universally adopted certain values and ideals like truth, justice, freedom, right to earn livelihood etc., which form the foundation of almost all civil societies. History is also witness that these ideals have come in conflict with the interests of the ambitious and powerful people in the society who have tried to subvert these basic principles, so essential for the wellbeing of society, for their personal gains. If one critically looks at the human history at any point of time, the societies and countries appear to be ruled by individuals or groups of individuals who are adept in manipulation, treachery, double speak and are imposters of high ideals. On the other hand societies have survived and flourished due to the high moral values which run deep into the fabric of the society and are cherished by common people. These values and ideals, for some inexplicable reasons, persist in spite of the apparent impression of their being at discount. There are legends and folktales of exceptionally fearless and upright individuals who have risen from time to time to uphold the high ideals and moral values, at the peril of even their own lives. In the difficult and trying times, these legends become source of inspiration for the next generations and help keep these principles and ideals alive.

The Dogra land, which spans between high mountain ranges of Pir Panchal and Dholladhar in North and extending up to plains of Punjab in South and from Satluj in the East to Manavar Tawi in the West, is rich in its tradition of folklore and folk literature in various forms. A very prominent form of folk poetry, which flourished in the past and is surviving till date, is the folk ballad. There are two categories of folk ballad that are very popular in Dogri language – 'Baars' and 'Karaks'. Baars are poetic narration of the valour and courage exhibited by warrior heroes, mostly in battle field, and 'Karaks' are sagas of the supreme sacrifices made by individuals who laid down their lives for a moral or social cause. 'Baars' and 'Karaks' are sung by 'Dareses' and 'Gardees', the professional folk singers of the Dogra region. The heroes of Baars and Karaks are treated as icons of the culture. This reverence and respect is so deep rooted, that with the passage of time most of the heroes of 'Karaks' have attained the status of folk deities, with temples and shrines being built to worship them. The qualities and moralistic attributes of these heroes and the values they tried to uphold have been treasured by the masses in the form of these ballads and hence these depict the social and cultural ethos of the Dogra community.

For this study three of the most popular folk ballads of the Dogra region have been selected. The first of these, the 'Karak of Baba Jitto', is an account of the life and deeds of a peasant, Jitmal. This *Karak*, which contains 319 lines in its present form, is perhaps the most well known and popular of all the Karaks. Jitmal, born more than five hundred years ago in a hilly village 'Ghaar', near Katra Vaishnodevi, had to migrate, along with his young daughter, to Jhiri in the lower plains of Jammu in search of livelihood. On his request the Wazir of Jammu, Mehta Birsingh leased out to him a piece of infertile land after entering into a contract that one fourth of the yield from the land will go to Mehta. Jitmal, by dint of his hard labour and toil, was able to convert that barren piece of land into a high yielding fertile field. At the time of harvest it had a rich growth of high quality crop. Mehta Birsingh was astonished to see the quantity and quality of the crop. Greed took control of him and he tried to forcibly grab the yield of wheat crop, much more than what had been agreed to under the land lease contract. Jitmal tried to reason with Mehta, but it was of no avail. Jitmal tried to resist the forcible and unjustified grabbing of the crop by Mehta and his goons. Finding the situation beyond his control, Jitmal leaped and stood over the heap of wheat. He thrust his own dagger in his belly and uttered the words: 'Oh, Mehta you need not eat only the wheat, I mix my meat in it.'

*“Sukki Kanak nin Khaayan
Mehtya, dinda maas relayee”*

Saying thus, he laid down his life. Jitmal's young daughter also immolated herself on her father's funeral pyre. According to the Karak, the curse of Jitmal and his daughter made Mehta Birsingh to go through a very miserable life and he was subjected to unlimited sufferings. Lakhs of people from all over Jammu and adjoining Punjab gather annually to pay homage and tribute to Baba Jitto at Jhiri, where he sacrificed

his life and also at Ghaar, his birth place. At both these places his temples have been erected. Baba Jitto has emerged as the first peasant hero of Duggar who sacrificed his life for the right of peasants.

The second ballad is the 'Baar of Deedo', which revolves around the life of Main Deedo, who was born in Jagti, near Jammu city in the year 1780. At that time Jammu was under the control of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh of Punjab, who ruled from Lahore. The Dogra region of Jammu was subjected to frequent invasions and acts of loot perpetrated by armed invaders from Punjab. The situation was so grim and chaotic that, according to the folklore, people would knead the flour at one place, cook at another and eat at yet another location. Deedo, soon after attaining adulthood, pledged to strive for the freedom of Dogras from the foreign rule of Punjab and for their right to live peacefully in their own land. Till his death at the age of 40, he continued his armed struggle persistently, in the face of the mighty adversary, for achieving this goal. In spite of many desperate attempts by Lahore Durbar, through armed contingents, Deedo could neither be captured nor killed. Deedo had a strong support of the local population for whom he was a saviour of their honour and freedom. He mainly attacked the police 'thanas' set up by the ruling authorities and fought the armed troops, sent to subjugate or eliminate him, through guerrilla warfare and invariably succeeded in defeating and demoralising them. It was then Deedo's writ that ran throughout the Jammu region. Tired and wary of the influence of Deedo, the Punjab Durbar tactfully decided to pitch another Dogra warrior Gulab Singh, loyal to the Punjab Durbar, against Deedo. And Gulab Singh succeeded in isolating and killing Deedo through tactics and machinations. Pleased with his achievement, Maharaja Ranjeet Singh conferred on Gulab Singh the kingship of Jammu.

Obviously the official historians of those times, mostly commissioned by the rulers, did not make any mention of Deedo, or if they did, they showed him in very poor light and portrayed him unfairly as a dacoit and a thief. However, Deedo's story and deeds survived through folklore and folk ballads. The *Baar* sung over the centuries by *Dareses* is a testimony to the reverence and love with which the people cherish the memories of this great freedom fighter. The *Baar* available in the present form has 88 lines. A frequent refrain in this *Baar* is a message to the 'foreign rulers' to leave Kandi Land of Dogras and remain content with their own Punjab, reminding of the golden principle 'live and let live'.

*"Bairiya Kandi Chhodi de,
Apna Majhe da mulk Sambhal"*

For the people of Dogras, Deedo is a symbol of freedom from foreign rule and subjugation. Ranpat the hero of the 'Karak of Datta Ranpat', the third ballad selected for this study was a Purohit (priest) of Birpur, a village near Jammu. Birpur was 'Jagir' of 'Baangi', a ruthless and tyrant ruler. He tried to forcibly grab the land belonging to his cousins who were not affluent like him. However this resulted in a dispute

and Baangi requested Ranpat to mediate and settle the dispute by acting as a Sarpanch. In spite of the reluctance of his mother, who could foresee trouble due to the cunning nature of Baangi, Ranpat accepted the assignment. After Ranpat assumed this responsibility, 'Baangi' tried to win his favour by offering him gifts in cash and kind. However, contrary to Baangi's expectations, Ranpat refused to accept the gifts. This worried and infuriated Baangi who now applied strong arm tactics of threats towards Ranpat. Ranpat, ignoring both the enticements and threats, went ahead with delivering the judgment based on evidence, which obviously went in favour of the cousins of 'Baangi'. While Ranpat was returning after delivering the judgment, he was ambushed and beheaded by the killers hired by Baangi. Ranpat's mother immolated herself on the funeral pyre of his son. Later, Ranpat's pregnant wife also performed 'sati' after delivering her son.

The legend, according to the *Karak*, has it that Baangi was afflicted with leprosy and unlimited hardships befell on him and his close relations. In repentance a temple of Datta Ranpat has been erected at Birpur, where till date a large number of people gather, once in a year, to pay obeisance to Ranpat who is worshipped as a deity. The *Karak* of Ranpat, in its present form, has 219 lines.

The central themes of these three folk ballads of Duggar concern three basic tenets, which form the pillars of any civilised society, namely; justice, right to freedom and the right to earn a livelihood. Curiously enough, the incidents which are the subject of these ballads pertain to feudal times when such concepts and ideas were taboo. Further, the heroes of these legends, though coming from a humble and ordinary background, took cudgels with and stood up against the mighty ruling feudal lords of those times. They must have had the support of the masses as they are representing the societal values of common people. The popularity of these ballads and the iconic stature of these heroes is a strong evidence of this fact. A hero is normally a person who accomplishes some things which the common people desire to do but cannot do due to various reasons like lack of courage. With the passage of time, the number of people, who gather at the shrines of these heroes, has increased manifold, indicating thus, the universality of the values for which they laid down their lives. Incidentally, the relevance of these folk ballads could not have been more than it is in the present times.