

Religious Beliefs, Practices And Change: A Case Study Of Kinnaura Tribe

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Abstract: Present study deals with the tribe of Himachal Pradesh, who lives in the district of Kinnaur. The inhabitants of Kinnaur are popularly known as the Kinnauras or Kinnaurese. They have their own cultural pattern which is quite distinct from that of the plain areas and even from that of the other areas of Himachal Pradesh. Kinnaura tribe does not form a homogeneous community. It is a heterogeneous society with respect to race, caste, religion and dialects. The caste system formed the backbone of this society from the time immemorial. The prevalence of caste system sharply distinguished Kinnaura tribe from majority of Indian tribes. Kinnaur, though treated as Schedule Tribe area, is a place of co-existence of unorthodox Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. From the field investigation it is found that besides the above mentioned religions there are many local gods and goddess, including elements of animism, naturism and ancestor-worship which resembles with the sacred world of tribes in India. Objective of this paper is to give insider's view about the religious beliefs and practices of the Kinnaura tribe. Therefore, researcher will focus to analyze the characteristics of traditional religion of Kinnauras, changes in religious practices and influence of other religions and religious sects, etc.

Keywords: Kinnaura, Tribe, Religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Castes, Gods – Goddess.

I. INTRODUCTION

Present study deals with the tribe of Himachal Pradesh, who lives in the district of Kinnaur. It forms a western part of great Himalayan Ranges and the North-eastern part of Himachal Pradesh. This district is secluded, rugged and mountaneous and covers both sides of the river Satluj, is bounded on the north by the Spiti area of the district Lahul and Spiti, on the east by Tibet, on the west by Shimla district of Himachal Pradesh and on the South by Tehri Garhwal and Utrakashi district of Uttranchal. The inhabitants of Kinnaur are popularly known as the Kinnauras or Kinnaurese. They have their own cultural pattern which is quite distinct from that of the plain areas and even from that of the other areas of Himachal Pradesh. Villages are situated on the either side of river Satluj and its tributaries. Kinnaur, though treated as Schedule Tribe area, is a place of co-existence of unorthodox Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. Purpose of this paper is to give insider's view about the religious beliefs and practices of the Kinnaura tribe. This study is based on the field work

carried out in three villages in Kinnaur namely Nichar, Kothi and Kanam. Therefore, Objective of this study is to analyze the characteristics of traditional religion of Kinnauras, changes in religious practices, beliefs and influence of other religions and religious sects, etc.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on primary as well as secondary data. Qualitative information was collected and the techniques employed to collect information from field were interview schedule, observation technique, focus group discussion, and informal discussions. In accordance with the interview method of study, key persons were selected from the village under study to get idea of the socio-cultural life of the villages. The informants were chosen to represent the different sections of the village community with regard to its social and economic strata.

Secondary data concerning the village under study was collected mostly from the village surveys of Kothi, Nichar and Kanam villages. District gazetteers, books and other unpublished reports were also taken into account to construct a coherent picture of religious life of Kinnaura society.

III. DISCUSSION

Opinion of the earlier scholars on Kinnaur shows diversity in the observation of the religion of the Kinnauras. Some have recognized Kinnauras as Hindus and other as Buddhist (Joshi, 1910). But common opinion is that Kinnaur is the place of co-existence of two different religions - Hinduism and Buddhism (Gerald: 1841, Duester: 1939, Sanskrityan: 1948, Raha and Mahato: 1985). Thus, the Kinnaura Tribe far from being homogeneous shows heterogeneity in respect of religion. It is also referred by some scholars as hybrid religion (Duester, 1939: 84) and the presence of such heterogeneous religion will create interest among the scholars. Let's first begin with the Hindu religion of the Kinnauras as claimed in the above studies and the response of the local people in villages Kothi and Nichar.

Though people in Kothi and Nichar villages claim to be Hindu but it is observed during the field work that they are not orthodox Hindus. They are not highly Sanskritised or Brahmanical in that they do not adhere closely to the written description and prescriptions of the Post Vedic Hinduism (Srinivas, 1952: 30). This unorthodoxy is the subject matter of debate in this paper. Majumdar (1962: 249) in his discussion on the religious life of Khasa points out that Khasas claim to be Hindus but their social life as well as their beliefs and practices connected with their religion do not identify them with the Hindus of the plains. While they worship Hindu gods and goddesses, they also take special interest in ancestor spirits, queer and fantastic demons and gods, and in worshipping of stones, weapons, dyed, rags, and symbols.

Researcher has observed some of the similar practices being followed in Kinnaur. Religious life of Kinnauras is primarily concerned with supernatural beings that have power over the people of the villages. These supernatural beings are gods and goddesses, and spirits and ghosts which affect the villagers. Therefore, the central features of religious life move around these supernatural beings or the gods and goddesses.

Villagers in all the three villages of study, irrespective of whether they claim to be Hindus or Buddhist, worship numerous god and goddesses. In fact, these gods and goddesses are distinguished into two categories in Kinnaur. These are household deity and village deity. Household deity is locally referred to as *Kimshu* or *Sat*. It is important to draw a distinction between household deity and village deity. As their names suggest, household deity is worshipped by the members of a household or clan. Usually a small portion of the kitchen-cum-dining room (locally known as *Panthang*) or some other corner of a room or granary (*Urch*) is devoted to the household deity. Objects like small metal mask or snake, stone, metal implements, horn of sheep, goat, or other animals are kept at the place dedicated to them as they believe that household deity resides in those objects. Specialise priest is not required to worship these household deities. On the other

hand village deity has greater honour and more influential than household deity, and is revered and worshipped by all the villagers. Worshipping is performed by a priest who belongs to a particular clan from the upper caste only. It may be noted that there are more than one village deities who are worshipped by the villagers but they are less honoured as compared to Principal deity. Principal deity of the village exercises its control over all other deities, villagers and spirits. Every village has its temple dedicated to the principal deity locally referred as *Kothee* or abode of village deity (sanctum sanctorum) and it is attached with open space locally called as *Santhang* or *Santang*.

It is observed during the field work that there are number of functionaries of the Principal deity in each village. These functionaries are divided on caste lines. As the caste system formed the backbone of this tribe from the time immemorial and this prevalence of caste system sharply distinguished Kinnaura tribe from majority of Indian tribes. Considering their social hierarchy, all the castes among Kinnauras, are generally grouped into two groups: upper caste and untouchable lower caste. The upper caste comprises Khosia or Rajputs and lower caste includes Chamang, Domang and Ores. The maintenance of the separateness of caste and of the structural distance between upper caste and lower is achieved through the idea of Purity-Pollution. Functionaries do all kinds of works connected with deity and management of the temple affairs. Certain important functionaries like *Pujari* (Priest), *Mathas* (Petitioner), *Motmin* or *Khajanchee* (Accountant), *Grockch* (Oracle) *Bhandari* (Granary Manager) etc. are hereditary in nature and are from the upper caste only. Another essential aspect of Principal deity is the musical instruments. Lower castes are musician of the village Deity. Therefore, irrespective of caste, villagers are closely associated with the village deity in a different capacity as functionaries which are divided on the caste lines.

IV. FUNCTIONS OF HOUSEHOLD DEITY AND VILLAGE DEITY/ DEITIES

As we know that household deity represent a particular household or a lineage in which it has its abode. Household deity is worshipped to protect family from unforeseen troubles, for the welfare of family and to inflict trouble to the other people for some conflict with the intended party. As it is clear from the above discussion that the Principal deity has premier position in the village. Variety of functions is routinely performed by the Principal deity and other subordinate deities through its functionaries on different occasions in the village. Villagers celebrate number of fairs and festivals routinely in a year and village deity performs different worshipping rituals in these fairs and festivals. Besides these functions, village deity also ensures the welfare of its public and mitigation of their sufferings. It also acts as adjudicator in the village in matters related to family disputes, non-compliance of order of the deity, and disputes affecting larger public in the village. In times of crisis like natural calamities, villagers pray for protection. Deity also acts as a preserver of the cultural tradition of the village. Village festivals are required to be compulsorily celebrated routinely.

Any breach in observance of ritual/ folk dance and singing during village festivals or non-participation by any household are punished by the deity in pecuniary terms. People with grievances approach the deity and make plea to the deity to inflict trouble to the person creating problems to them. Person thus, affected with trouble is required to worship the deity who inflicted trouble and request the deity to alleviate their problems. Victims must approach the offending deity and confess their guilty. In Nichar animal sacrifices like sheep and goat are performed by the Deity Chilang but Principal deity does not offer animal sacrifices whereas, in Kanam, animal sacrifice is completely prohibited by the Principal deity and in village Kothi, deity stopped such sacrifices 10-12 year ago on the advice of Buddhist Lama. People believe in different types of evil spirits and these evil spirits are believed to be accompanying with individual during marriage or at the time of passing by an individual from a place believed to be inhabited by these spirits. Encounter with evil spirits may cause trouble. Its possession in the individual is indicated by sudden illness with pain, physical impairment and abnormal behaviour. Propitiation of these evil spirits is done either by the members of the victim's family or by the village deity. Decision adjudicated by the deity on the issues stated above cannot be violated. People cannot dare challenge the decision of the deity in the Court of Law. People believe that deity punishes the wrong doer by inflicting harm or suffering and fine in terms of money. Order of the deity must be obeyed.

Village deity also takes care for the welfare of the entire village. From time to time worship and propitiation of evil spirits is performed in a year to prevent or overcome the difficulties occasioned by shortage or excess of rain and snow, evil spirits, diseases and sudden rise in deaths in the village. Big worshipping ceremony is carried out at a regular interval every year by the deity to protect villagers from disease and loss of crops. From time to time deity makes predictions that village will suffer due to befall of diseases and crop failures and to protect from such potential difficulties deity advises villagers to arrange things for worshipping ceremony (*Khorcha*). Therefore, village deity observes multifarious functions in the villages.

V. BUDHIST PRACTICES AND BELIEFS

As far as Buddhism is concerned in Kinnaur Buddhism was introduced via Tibet and thus, the beliefs and practices are basically those of Tibetan Buddhism. People following Buddhism in Kinnaur belong to the four different branches of Tibetan Buddhism namely - Nyingmapa, Dukpa, Kargyudpa and Gelugpa. Collective as well as individual ritual performances are carried out for obtaining merit to the villagers and individuals; and warding off evil spirits. It is observed that there are many animistic deities in Tibetan Buddhism, beside other God and Goddesses. People worship them with incense and rites are performed for good virtue and to free from suffering due to evil spirits and diseases. These rituals are always performed by Lamas or sometimes by nuns. Lamas and nuns are also invited for recitation of hymns and reading Buddhist Texts. Lama is also called during the death, birth, illness and Marriage. It is observed that influence of

Buddhism is deeper in Kanam as people receive religious guidance from birth to death from the Lama/ monks. However, in case of village Kothi and Nichar, no detailed Buddhist performances are held in the village.

KANAM

Kanam is famous for age old Buddhist temples, Monasteries and a library. These temples and Monasteries form the Centre of their Buddhist religious practices and beliefs. In Kanam village entrance or gate marks the boundary of the village, and ceiling of the gate is decorated with Buddhist art. A small prayer wheel (*Mane*) is fixed in the right side wall of the gate. Besides this a number of Buddhist Stupas (*Chhosten*) are erected in different directions in the village. It is generally believed that these Stupas are erected to stop evil spirits entering into the village.

It is also interesting to see small stupas installed on the roof tops facing the east. The number of stupas on individual household's roof top may range from one to three. Some of the households also keep stones inscribed with Buddhist hymns and white stone along with the small stupas. Each house host prayer flags (*Darchhod* and *Lungta*) permanently. These flags are also stamped with Buddhist hymns and some of the prayer flags on the roof tops can be seen attached with Black Yak's tail hair. Besides the village Buddhists' temples, some households dedicate one room to the Buddhist Gods and Goddess. It may be noted that Lama performs a religious rite of greater importance in the village. Regular public religious events are held in a year which is largely celebrated in the village Buddhist temples or monasteries and villagers compulsorily attend the events. In addition to the village level events, religious performances are held at individual household level on different occasions like birth, marriage, illness and death. Sometimes such performances are carried out for gaining merit (*Sonams*, or well-being of household). Recitation of hymns and reading of text continue till the conclusion of the rites.

KOTHI

There is no Buddhist temple in the village; however, a Stupa is erected few years back at the centre of the village. It is also noted that till few years back in Kothi no Buddhist rituals were observed publicly. However, at the individual household level, they availed the services of Lamas from neighbouring village monastery or temple. But they do not observe calendrical rituals but invite Lama on different occasions like marriage, illness, death and for gaining merits.

NICHAR

Buddhism could not make its presence in Nichar till very late. It is interesting to know that even these days also in the locality of lower caste Nag deity (serpent deity) does not allow observance of Buddhist rituals and practices. Buddhism made its dent in late eighties of the 20 century when a young nun from this village constructed Buddhist temple in Nichar village. There is also one nunnery along with this temple and at present 3 nuns reside in this nunnery. The gradual

acceptance of Buddhism can be inferred from the Stupas constructed in four different directions at the periphery of the village about 20 years ago. Some of the houses of upper caste can be seen hosting Buddhist Prayer flags (Darchhod / Lungtaa). The important factor for the spread of Buddhist practices in Nichar is matrimonial alliances and contact with the people from Buddhist dominated areas. Particularly women hailing from Buddhist areas after their marriage started observing Buddhist ritual practices in their households. They take service of either the Lamas from other villages or the Buddhist ritual specialist (*Buchan*) from the adjoining district of Lahul and Spiti. Discussions with nuns reveal that nowadays about 40 households of Khosia avail their services. However, these practices are not observed here very frequently as are being observed in Kanam.

From the above discussions, it is evident that Buddhism is followed more or less in all the three villages and slowly its influence is spreading in Kothi and Nichar villages. It is found that in Kanam most of the religious observances are performed for good virtue.

VI. CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

Introduction of developmental schemes have broken the seclusion of Kinnaura society. As a result many people come out of Kinnaur for education and jobs, and came in contact with mainstream Indian social life, influencing their religious life too. Sanskritising trends in respect of religious life can be noticed. Many young women who are taking education out of Kinnaur have started keeping fast in the name of Hindu god and goddesses on prescribed days in a week. Those who are in jobs in urban areas outside Kinnaur, sometimes invite Brahmin or Pandit for performance of religious rituals in their houses. They also started preparing horoscope of newly born children from pundits and try to match horoscope of bride and groom for marriage. The instances of temple marriages are noticed outside Kinnaur. But when they come back to their native villages in Kinnaur they equally participate and observe traditional religious beliefs and practices. No example of breach of such practices is reported from these villages till now. Christianity and other Hindu religious sects like RadhaSoami, Nirankari and Brahma Kumaris too made their entry in to Kinnaur. RadhaSoami has set up their branch in Kothi village whereas Christianity and Brahma Kumaris have established their institutions at ReckongPeo, the district headquarter. However, all the three have only limited influence on the local people. Only a small number of native people are followers of these new religions. There are no follower of RadhaSoami in village Kanam and Nichar while in village Kothi only one family is dedicated to this faith. There are few followers of Sai Baba, Brahma Kumaris, Christian Missionaries and SantNirankari in Kinnaur. Two Christian missionary centres namely Body of Christ and FMPB were opened at Kalpa and Reckong Peo respectively in the mid-nineties. Information regarding the members of these

missionary centres show that in FMBP out of 56 members only 6 members are locals and rest of the 50 members are migrant workers working in the hydel projects. However Body of Christ is now run by locals only and seven families are associated with this centre and all native families converted to Christianity hail only from the lower caste. Therefore, it can be said that all sections of people in these three villages are not equally receptive to new centres of religion.

VII. CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that Kinnaur is a place of both Hinduism and Buddhism, but the former is not orthodox in nature. Though Tibetan Buddhism is followed by the people of Kinnaur and its influence decreases as we move from Kanam in the east to Nichar in the west. Irrespective of presence of Buddhism in different villages, the central feature of religious life in the three villages weave around local god and goddesses. Deity system exists along with Buddhism and culture of deity system is uniformly present in all the three villages, including Buddhist dominated village like Kanam. However, the influence of Buddhism is spreading in other parts of the Kinnaur during the last 20-25 years. Sanskritising trends can be seen among the educated people of Kinnaur. Though Christian missionaries and other Hindu religious sects like RadhaSoami, Nirankari and Brahma Kumaris have established their institutions in Kinnaur but so far they could not leave much impact on the local people. Scanty membership in these centres shows that these new religious centres are yet to take roots among the local people.

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