



Wisdom of Ancestors of the Lahaula Tribe: Relevance of Folk Knowledge in the Contemporary Society

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Abstract

A tribe is one such community of people living in a primitive state. In general, tribal society is at the early stage in the development phases of any society. Tribal people are very much connected to their environment, i.e., physical, biological, or cultural. Every society is dynamic, so a tribal society is not distinct from this reality. Various types of changes are happening in the lifestyle of a tribal society. They are losing their distinct identity. There is a need to investigate the primitive wisdom of these people to know how they could survive in such a period where there were no external resources like modern health facilities, modern education systems, modern entertainment mediums, communication, and transportation facilities available to them. How could they survive in harsh conditions due to geographical and weather conditions? Undoubtedly, some knowledge of our ancestors came in handy for surviving to the present day of our lives. There were some beliefs, customs, and practices related to the environment or daily life that became part of our ancestral knowledge. In the present era, as the 76th Republic Day of India, the theme was defined as Swarnim Bharat: Virasat and Vikas (Golden India: Legacy and Progress), our need to explore and discuss the ancient folk knowledge of the tribal people (who are considered as the carriers of cultural heritage) is important to incorporate them in our contemporary society.

Keywords: Wisdom, ancestors, tribe, contemporary society, folk knowledge.

Introduction

Folk knowledge of the ancestors belonging to an area consists of beliefs, customs, or practices happening in that area. Folk is generally a term that denotes the common people residing in a specific geographical area and belonging to a primitive traditional culture, and have a very low level of modernization that has impacted them. These are the people who are at a very early stage of the development phase. A tribal society is one such society where most of the people belong to one community, and share a common folk culture. These people, relative to other areas, have resided in a primitive state of life, and in present times also they are also living their lives following their traditional lifestyle.

Various changes have happened in these tribal areas as there was a need by the Government to merge them with the developed areas, or to bring them together so that holistic development could be attained. Various new rules and regulations are implemented, which focus on these tribal areas for achieving the goal of a holistic approach to development. Still, one could see that these people, with a little change in their lifestyle, follow their folk culture diligently. There are some things to note about them that could be seen as a medium by which we can adapt to our so-called modern culture, which will benefit all of us in the coming years in aspects of environmental sustainability, social cohesion, cultural heritage, health facilities, and psychological balance.

The main thing to be highlighted in this paper is to explore the primitive knowledge of the ancestors of the Lahaula tribe of Himachal Pradesh. This will also help to discuss the ancestral wisdom of this tribe related to their environment, society, culture, and health sectors. This paper will also focus on highlighting the significance of this specific folk wisdom in contemporary society.

One such study was done by Moeti, Mulaudzi, and Rasweswe, where they mainly aimed to review the literature on the indigenous methods of placenta disposal. They had highlighted the fact that the indigenous groups observe the rituals or ceremonies prior to their placenta disposal as it bears sacred importance to them. These methods have a significant value to the indigenous women on a global level. All these rituals performed have special meaning attached to them like if not disposed properly it may affect woman's future fertility prospects, or of her descendants. Some examples have been cited by them where such beliefs, and rituals exist like among the Australian home-birthing women, and among the Marakwet community of Kenya¹.

Methodology

The presented paper focuses on the significance of the wisdom of the folk population of the Lahaula tribal area in early times to modern society. The research design of this paper of exploratory and descriptive. The ethnographic method is used for this study.

The primary data collection methods like observation, and unstructured interviews with the old folk of selected tribal areas. For secondary data sources help of books, articles, and magazines focusing on this tribal culture has been considered. A total of ten to fifteen old folk of this tribe who have an interest in the folk culture aspect of this tribe were interviewed.

Study area: For the selected research paper, the Lahaul tribe is selected. The Lahaul tribe is one of the tribes listed in the Indian constitution and is given a scheduled tribe status. The Lahaul tribe resides in the Lahaul-Spiti district of state of Himachal Pradesh of India. This district has a hundred percent of actual tribal inhabitants, and is divided into two main subdivisions, namely Lahaul and Spiti sub-division, in addition to one more sub-division of Udaipur. Here, only the Lahaul part is considered. Lahaul also consists of three main valleys, which are divided based on the main river of this area, i.e., the Chandra-Bhaga River. The three main valleys of the Lahaul area are Chandra, Bhaga, and Chanderbhaga valleys. In the Lahaul tribe, a total of four communities of people reside, namely Bodh, Swangla, Lohar, and Chinal. All four communities can be found in the Chanderbhaga Valley, which is famously known as *Pattan* Valley. So, for this study, only the people of this valley had been considered. The knowledge of this valley had been considered.

Custom of keeping the Umbilical Cord and Stump of a Newborn Baby in the Lahaul Tribe

There are various types of customs which are been followed in the tribal areas all over the world. These customs are all mystical. It is very hard to trace how these customs originated, or who the creator of these customs is. Most of these customs are related to some mystical creatures or our surroundings. In India also various tribal groups have their share of customs and rituals, which they have been performing for a long time. In Himachal Pradesh, a state of Gods and Goddesses, most of the general districts are connected to their environment and their local deities. So, how could the tribal districts of this heavenly state of Himachal Pradesh be different from their surroundings? Tribal groups are groups of people who are deeply connected with their local roots of culture and tradition.

The presented custom of this tribal area was introduced to me during the journey of my data collection for the Ph.D. work, when I was working on the proposed research work of my thesis in the tribal area of the Lahaul sub-division of the Lahaul-Spiti district. There are various points of views given by several experts who had studied this valley with respect to the nomenclature of the valley which is Lahaul. Major Cunningham had earlier stated that the people of Tibet called it as *Laho-Yul*, which in Tibetan language meant the southern part (*Laho*) of land (*Yul*) to their area of Tibet². Rahul Sankrityayan had used the term *Laha-Yul* to describe this land of area³.

The term *Laha* meant God and *Yul* meant a land. So, collectively he described this area as a land of Gods. Andrew Wilson had defined the term Lahaul as a Hindi word which suggests according to him as wilderness, or a howling wilderness⁴. The actual inhabitants did not call this area as Lahaul. It is famous in the neighboring areas and in most of the outside population as Lahaul. In the book published by Garja Young Drukpa Association it is written that the people of Spiti, Ladakh, and Zanskar who are basically the Bhoti speaking population called this area as *Garja*, or *Garza Khandroling* which in local language means a land of *Dak* and *Dakinis*⁵.

In the Gazetteer of Lahul and Spiti, it is stated that under ancient Bodh literature of *Padam Thang-yang* and *MamKam-bum* there comes a description of one country named as *Khasha*, or *Hasha*. It is stated that this country lies to the south of Ladakh, and Zanskar. A possibility is there that *Garja*, or *Garsha* is a distorted form of these two terms. It is a fact that between sixth century B.C. to fifth century B.C. the Shaka and Khasha tribal people entered to India from the Middle Asia part as they were driven away by the Huns from their places⁶. The inhabitants of the Lahaul area called it as *Swangla* which is a local term belonging to the dialect of *Manchad* also known as the dialect of *Pattan* valley. Tobdan had written in his book that this term of *Swangla* is relevant to that part of Lahaul where Swangla people had settled during the medieval times as immigrants⁷.

As I was doing ethnographic work in this tribal area, and was connecting with the old folk of this area for more data collection, I came to know about the rich old cultural heritage of this tribe, primarily in primitive times. This tribal area is in a transition state of development, so most of these old traditions are forgotten, or are not been performed anymore in the present time. By talking to the old, and experienced folk belonging to this tribal area, one question was asked: what were the old folk traditions of this area, and what was their relevance? One common conclusion that can be drawn from the replies is that these folk traditions which originated from the pearls of wisdom of the ancestors of this tribal area play the role of providing a medium to connect with their physical environment like to their soil, air, climate, weather, and water but also their biological environments like species of local flora, and fauna; in addition, it providing a stage where all people of a village come together to interact with each other, and pass time happily and these all folk traditions constituted the rich cultural heritage of this tribal area.

One old and experienced person told me about a custom of this area that I had not heard of and had not seen by me performing anywhere. The custom was related to the birth rituals of a child after his/her birth. In this tribal area, there are no such distinct rituals or customs related to birth ceremonies, which are performed strictly, but there were some customs that were performed to protect the newborn baby from any type of mishap.

In this tribal area, when a baby is born then the *Naal*, i.e., umbilical cord which connects a mother to a child, is cut by a sharp thing by putting it on a plate of wood. This process was done by some experienced women of a village, as there were no facilities for hospitals then. The knife through which that cord is cut is then washed off and put under the pillow of the baby, as it is a belief that this will protect the baby from any sort of negative energies and nightmares. The umbilical cord is then put in a clean cloth and taken to the ground near a farm called *Mo-tral-da*, where it is buried down like storing it under the ground.

The umbilical cord stump, called *Re* which is a small piece of tissue that dries up and falls off a newborn baby's belly button (which usually happens within one to three weeks after birth), is preserved by putting it in a cloth in the form of an amulet. Some tie it down in a cloth, and some tie it within a silver pendant-like structure in the form of *taveez*, locally called *Shrunya*. This amulet is then tied to the clothes of the baby, like on the baby's shoulder. This is done to keep alive a connection to his or her mother, i.e., a memory of the baby of his/her connection to the mother. It also acts as a kind of safety guard for the baby from any mishaps. A local negative energy termed *Mo-tral-da-o Rha-gas* is taken as an evil that will harm the newborn babies, so to drive them away, this whole procedure is done. When the baby is born, at night time, the light in the room is also not turned off, as it is believed that it will harm the baby in the darkness. This whole custom of keeping the umbilical cord preserved and protected was done as a reminder of the connection between baby and mother, and to drive away this evil, as the umbilical cord stump is taken and tied to the clothes of the baby, which acts as a security shield to the baby.

In one of the festivals of this Lahaul tribe, i.e., *Hal-da*, or *Khogal*, which is like a local representation of the great festival of Hindus named *Diwali*, a burning torch (*Mashaal* locally called *Hal-da*) is carried out by males of this tribal area to worship the local deities. There is one type of *hal-da* that is carried out by the people of this tribe on the ground where the umbilical cord, and placenta are buried, as told by an old folk of the *Pattan Valley*. This type of *hal-da* was called *Mo-tral-da-o hal-da*, i.e., devoting a burning torch to the *Mo-tral-da* area (area of ground where these things are buried). It can be concluded that they are, in a way, worshipping the energies they hold within themselves for a baby, or for calming down the negative energy not to harm their newborn. As in earlier times, due to low health facilities available, the infant mortality rate of this tribal area was quite high, and very less of children stayed alive and reached adulthood.

One of the old folks, after telling this custom, said that whenever the ancestors were asked why they followed it, or what was the logic behind it, they could not answer back with a scientific reason. So, because of this limitation, the so-called educated generation left this custom a long time ago to perform. He said that nowadays, the same educated young parents are opting for preserving this umbilical cord as medical science has

stated their reasons for doing so. They are spending a lot of money in hospitals to preserve the blood of the umbilical cord of their babies, as the highly educated doctors had suggested to them to do so, and they are doing it willingly. But the generation that had become educated in early times had questioned the wisdom of their ancestors and had long ago left this custom out of their culture. The ancestors could not defend themselves by giving a logical argument against this custom then.

If we look at other tribal areas of India, the same kind of custom of keeping the umbilical cord safe and preserved is performed. Govind Sadashiv Ghurye provided a very detailed description of some beliefs and practices in India that mainly surround the umbilical cord and placenta of a baby in an article first published in 1937 titled *Disposal of the umbilical cord and placenta (with special reference to India)*⁸. In this article, he documented the beliefs and practices found in Tamil and Telugu-speaking South India. Several studies have been conducted on this topic, mainly in South Indian states where this practice is still being practiced. This was one of the statements of a pregnant woman which was discussed in an article by Amishi Panwar that why to preserve and donate the cord in hospital banks when they can do it for free and with their cultural belief in their own homes⁹.

Relevance of this Folk Wisdom in the Contemporary Society

McCarthy had published an article where the relevance of saving baby's cord blood has been discussed in detail with respect to medical science. In present times as medical science has developed, it is found that cord blood is quite rich in stem cells. It can later be used for stem cell transplants to treat various diseases like leukemia and immune deficiencies. It is taken as an important medical resource and is stored in a cord blood bank. This procedure of preserving a cord in modern times can be traced back to the folk knowledge of tribal groups¹⁰.

This ritual of Lahaul tribal group of keeping the umbilical cord and placenta preserved can be added to the paper published by Ghurye in 1937 where he had tried to examine all the practices of humans with respect to the disposal of first out hair, nail pairing, first fallen teeth and mainly of the disposal of after birth also called as placenta. The main purpose of this paper was to provide a comparison of methods related to the disposal of human placenta in different regions of world. This comparison was done to see if this fact sheds any light on the problem of evolution of culture through the process of diffusion.

Conclusion

Tribal ancestors have a huge knowledge and understanding of all-natural elements as they are closely connected to nature. Whether it be their lifestyle, food consumption, physical activities, and social gatherings' connectivity; all of these can be

taken as a base on which the new generation can seek reference to lead a healthy, happy, less hyper-ambitious, and cohesive social and cultural life while also carrying innovations and development measures of modern society.

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