

## Love and Bravery in the Oral Epics of Uttarakhand

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### ***Abstract***

*The present paper is a modest attempt to analyze the oral epics of Uttarakhand, Devbhumi. Oral literature is the product of culture and it is used to communicate experience from one generation to another, popularly known as folklore and includes folksongs, folktales, proverbs, fables, legends, riddles etc. These elements play an important role in the formation of oral epics and narrate the deeper meaning of life. It is a medium for passing social and ethical values to reflect the richness of a culture. It also presents an integral part of cultural and historical evidence. Oral epics are the medium to express the historical, cultural and social aspect of any society and to preserve the cultural continuity. They also include social philosophy and reflect the identity and values in the context of modern time. This paper discusses the themes of the oral epics of Kumaon and Garhwal i.e. love, bravery and supernatural elements and the relevance and need in the contemporary context. In the changing scenario, oral narrative can be a powerful medium of transmitting tradition and history in an artistic manner.*

***Keywords:*** Oral epics, folklore, tradition, legends, riddles, fables.

Uttarakhand is also known as 'Devbhumi', famous for its natural beauty, culture and religious spots. Its folk or oral tradition is as unique and rich as Uttarakhand itself. Oral tradition is the spirit of any culture as it represents the essence of it. In other words it can be said that oral tradition is a medium to express, preserve and enhance the heritage of any region. There is rarely any society which does not claim its legendary past. Uttarakhand oral epics reveal the richness of its culture; it is mainly based on nature, supernatural powers, justice, love and bravery. There are many stories that compel the people to think over it. The people of Uttarakhand still believe in the supernatural power of gods, demons and devils. The uniqueness of 'Pahari culture' is also reflected in its oral tradition such as 'virgathas' which form an interesting aspect of studying the

socio-cultural perceptions of the Kumauni folk; it becomes a valuable source of study of Himalayan culture.

Oral epics refer to the folk or the cultural or traditional process of passing information, especially in the form of music. They are traditional heroic narratives usually in poetry that convey unique forms of cultural knowledge performed in a non-literate society. Oral epics have been the important basis for the creation, recreation and continuation of culture itself. Culture is mostly dependent upon the stories that the people tell. It recreates another world that does not coherently exist as what we know to be reality. Folk epics are based on legends that occurred a long time before the epic itself appeared. Oral epics are the way of promoting social unity and also clearly expressed changes in mentality that affects society. Orality is a medium to connect different aspects of life in a unique manner and also passing it from one generation to the next. The traditions like Singing, dancing and storytelling are re-creative at every stage. After the invention of the printing press, oral literature attained new form in the form of written literature. The process of recreation is continued so long as the world presents it in the form of narratives.

Storytelling is known for its expressive nature, when humans began the process of storytelling, it led to the invention of culture. People are natural narrators; retelling stories that they have heard from others and recreate new ones through their imagination. The traditional performance, rituals and practices passed on from generations to generations for the purpose of preserving its history and culture. It is a medium reflecting collective memory as well as social action in a culture. When an oral epic is written down, it does not change the medium, but also language, audience and sometimes content. Folktales carry certain cultural codes that give them a unique identity. It is a conscious retelling of experiences and also shapes an individual's perception of life. The folk tales preserve, pass on a realism that is unconsciously accepted by the community.

It carries cultural memories, beliefs, rituals and representations of people's experience. It also includes their thoughts and philosophy. In the present time many oral epics are narrated and performed by some traditional performers. *Chhau*, *Machhani* and *Avadhanam* are some examples of In Telugu language, *Avadhanam* is a poem orally recited in response to a suggestion or a question by any other person. It can be said that many folk art forms are still flourishing despite the modern developments in entertaining media. The aroma of the folktale arises from its

community as it is extracted from a traditional community. Oral epics are repositories of social rules, norms and values and also act as an identity marker for the folk groups and a guideline of interaction. The experiences and reactions are understood and formulated from the worldview in oral epics. It is not only a medium of formulating norms and behaviours, but a successful way of teaching society's ethics. As ever, the past is reformed in order to give meaning to the present, and this gives oral epic continuing to influence today.

Vir Gathas are the biographies of the eminent warriors and are composed during their lifetime or in many cases after their death. Many of the oral epics exist across the political borders. Various narratives of Western Nepal are also found in Kumaun. Such heroic poems are known as 'Bharat' in Nepal. It also reflects the traditional rivalry between Kumaon and Garhwal region, i.e. *Dhamdev*, *Brahmdev*, *Kalu bhandari* etc. The legendary narratives are also called 'Bhada'. The word 'Bhada' is derived from 'bhata', a Sanskrit word which means a brave fighter. The themes of vir gathas are mainly related to love and war in which elements of revenge, rebellion and romance constitute an integral part of those legends. The legends of *Madho Singh Bhandari*, *Gadhusumariyal* and *Rikhola* are used to encourage the kings in the battle field. The virgathas are also used for entertainment and for energizing workers in fields, during harvesting and sowing. In some of the virgathas, the protagonist is a romantic lover as in the legends of *Rajula-Malushahi*, *Ramola*, *Jeetu Bagadwal*, *Kalu Bhandari* etc. Sometimes the hero is depicted as breaking barriers of caste and class in order to acquire his beloved. *Rajula Malushahi* is the famous narrative which is highly popularized in Kumaun.

*Rajula-Malushahi* is an eternal love story of Kumauni folk literature. This is the story about Prince Malushahi, the only son of Katyuri king Dulashahi of Vairat nagar and Rajula, daughter of Sunpati Shauka, rich trader and money lender of Johar region. It is the most popular epic love story from the Central Himalayas. According to the story, Sunpati was a rich businessman. His wife Ganguli Shaukyan was a very pious woman but was childless and worshipped Lord Shiva, praying for a child. King Dulashahi and his wife Dharma Devi were in the same situation. It is believed that all desires are fulfilled, if one takes dip in the Saryu, on 'Makar Sankranti' day. King Dulashahi and his queen Dharma Devi, Sunpati Shauka and his wife Ganguli Shaukyan came to Bageshwar and met each other on this auspicious occasion and became friends both of them vowed that if they had children, a boy and a girl, they would have

them married to each other. This story takes place when Rajula and Malushahi fall in love with each other without seeing each other. Time passes and Rajula's life is changed as a mysterious man begins to come in his dream, the man is no other than the prince Malushahi of katur. When Rajula learns that Malushahi and she had been sworn in marriage by their mothers before their birth, she tells about the dream to her mother. She decides to go to Vairat to meet Malushahi. After facing many problems she reached Malushahi's room but due to his mother's magical spells she couldn't meet him and returned to her home. Love, magic and witchcraft play an important role in the epic. How Rajula and Malushahi faced problems and finally united. This epic tale of Rajula- Malushahi has been sung by bards in the Kumaun region of Uttarakhand for centuries. This beautiful love tale of Rajula's bravery and Malushahi's devotion is an inspiration for the people of Uttarakhand.

Another bravery legend of Kumaun region is *Bafaul*. It is one of the famous historical and bravery legends of the 15th century. Balfa Brothers are known as the great brave men of King Bharti Chand reign in Kumaun region. Due to his queen Dotyalin he poisoned twenty-two brave Bafaul brothers by conspiracy. As they were very brave, the queen thought that they could be danger for the kingdom. She advised the king to killed twenty two Bafaul brothers as their bravery could be harmful for the king as well as kingdom. The king could not oppose the decision of the queen. Finally he poisoned Bafaul brothers. According to the story the queen was very cunning. The mischievous queen kept eyes on Bafaul brothers. One day the Dotyalin queen said to Bafaul brothers, "You twenty two brothers are brave men. Being so brave you serve the king. On the contrary you should kill the king and become the king. I shall become your queen." Bafaul brothers rejected the proposal of the queen. The Dotyalin queen became furious. She was afraid that Bafaul brothers might complained to the king about the conspiracy. The queen felt insulted and decided to take revenge. She complained to the king that Bafaul brothers tried to seduce her. After listening to her, the king became very angry and he called butchers for killing the Bafaul brothers. The butchers killed all Bafaul brothers while they were sleeping. Due to the conspiracy of Dotyalin queen Bafaul brothers were killed. In this legend the conspiracy of Dotyalin queen and the bravery of Bafaul brothers were expressed. Later Ajay Bafaul revenged the death of his father and uncles.

Another legend of *Ajay Bafaul* is as famous as the Bafaul brothers. Ajay Bafaul was one of the brave men in king Bhartichand kingdom. He helped the king from the exploitation of four brave men who came to Champawat garh in hope of great fight and sufficient food. The four brave men were created by the five deities just for fun. When they asked about the food, the deities answered, "We take Bhasma, if you wish you make it." The brave men replied, "O deities! Either you arrange food for us or kill us or tell us the name of four brave men that we fight with and die". Five deities thought it was sin to kill their own creation. Deities advised them to go to Champawat. The king may provide you food or may fight with suitable competitors but the king said that now Champawat garh is without brave men. so you take food of your choice. But the brave men exploited the people. The king became worried as he had already killed all Bafaul brothers. There was no brave man to fight with four brave men sent by deities. The minister went to Bafulakot and told the story to Ajay Bafaul about the brave men residing in Champawat. Due to those brave men, all work was stopped in Champawat. His mother cautioned him about the killer of his father and his uncles. He knew that the king was the murderer of his father and his uncles. So he put the condition before the king that after freeing Champawat from the brave men, the king had to sit in court with one side moustache and without crown and the cruel and cunning Dotyalin queen would serve him as a maid servant in Bafulakot. He helped the king and the king and the queen fulfilled the condition. This is a well-known legend of Bafaul which is inspiring generation after generation in the most aspiring manner. How Ajay Bafaul was devoted to his motherland and helped the killer of his father and his uncles? He presents a perfect example of bravery, dedication and devotion to his motherland.

Human life is full of challenges and when an individual faces all those challenges with bravery, then that kind of act of bravery makes a man an inspiration for next generations. Garhwal region is full of brave men. The story of *Madho Singh Bhandari* is an inspiring story of Garhwal. His unbelievable act of bravery makes him immortal. He was a very great warrior and it is said that he won the area of Tapovan for king Mahipati shah. The king presented him with the Maletha village. According to the popular legend Once Madho Singh was going to his village, he saw that the whole region was dry and barren. People were unable to cultivate crops due to lack of water. He was very sad to see the condition of the village and pledged that he would not sleep peacefully until he brings water to the Maletha village. Next day Madho Singh went on a search and he noticed that only the Chandrabhaga River was the only nearest water

body in the Maletha region. The only solution to this problem is to connect the village with the Chandrabhaga River. Madho Singh and the villagers had to dig a tunnel but the water was not flowing into the tunnel after many efforts. When everybody had lost hope, one night the goddess appeared in Madho Singh's dream and told him that he had to sacrifice his son for the prosperity of Maletha. In order to bring life into the village, he offered his son to the goddess and the water started flowing into the tunnel. In Maletha whenever someone talks about bravery and selflessness, the legend (virgatha) of Madho Singh is remembered and sung with pride. Madho Singh is worshipped by the villagers for his bravery during harvesting season.

*Ramaul* is also known as *Ramola*. It is an important folklore as *Rajula Malushahi*. *Gangu Ramola* and *Siduva- Biduva* are part of *Ramola gatha*. *Ramaul* is a famous folklore about the curse of God on Gangu Ramola. *Ramola gatha* is equally famous in Garhwal region. The Kumauni folklore appreciates the bravery and 'Bugsa vidya' of Siduva and Biduva. It is said that Once Lord Krishna saw Ramoligarh in dream and attracted to Ramoligarh. He sent letter to the king and explained that he is attracted by the beauty of Ramoligarh and he requires only two yards land. But Gangu Ramola denied. Now Krishna decided to come to Ramoligarh in the disguise of Brahmin. He requested two yards land from Gangu Ramola. He became angry and took out his sword. Krishna transformed into a bee and cursed Gangu. Due to the effect of curse; Gangu lost all his wealth and started begging. One day he reached to Dwarika and played Damru. Rukmani, the wife of lord Krishna came outside and offered him the food. But due to the curse of Krishna the whole rice changed into worms and curry changed into blood. Gangu thought of a curse. Rukmani advised him to meet Krishna for pardon. Ramola begged pardon and Krishna pardoned Ramola. This folklore is sung by Ramola singers in Kumaon and Garhwal region in different forms. *Ramol gatha* was sung for months in ancient time. But now it is limited to only interior areas of Kumaon and Garhwal.

Another story *Seeduwa -Biduva* is a part of *Ramola gatha*. It is said that Seeduwa-Biduva was expert in 'twelve shastras' and 'Boksadi mantras'. One day they decided to go to unli Bhawar With the herds of goat and sheep in an inauspicious time. The queen Bijumati suggested not visiting Pyunli Bhawar. But he did not listen and took the animals to Pyunli Bhawar. The queen and the prince Baleshwar also went with them. When the queen and the prince were sleeping, Ramola brothers left them in the forest and went to Pyunli Bhawar. The queen came

back to Ramoligarh. It is also said that Ramola brothers were proud of their knowledge. So Lord Krishna thought to diminish the pride of Ramola brothers. Krishna ordered his servant Kaluwa Bajir to attack Ramoligarh. Due to the curse of “Sadhe Sati” on Ramolas, Kaluwa’s army won over Ramoligarh. Gangu and prince Baleshwar were killed on the battlefield. Baleshwar became ‘Kafuva bird’ and went to Bhawar to meet Ramola brothers. Baleshwar informed them about the battle with Kalu Bajir. Siduva disguised himself as hudkiya (the person who plays Hudka) and reached Ramoligarh. With the help of his shastra-vidya, Boksadi vidya, He created thousands of brave soldiers and defeated Kalu Bajir. So finally Ramola brothers came back to Ramoligarh. In this folklore influence of magic could be seen from beginning till end. How Ramola brothers created thousands of warriors with the help of Boksadi mantras. Ramaul is considered as a magical folk epic in Kumauni folk literature.

Garhwali literature is famous for its bravery legends. In the history of Garhwal, *Five Kathaitbrother’s* history is also famous. After the death of king, five Kathait brothers become more powerful. They become the guardian of Prince Pradeep Shah as they were the brothers of queen. The Queen Rule period is known as “Black period of Garhwal.” As Kathait brothers were leading the whole kingdom, people were unhappy due to their cruel and oppressive rule. This oppressive rule is known as “kathaitgardi” in Garhwal. Kathait brothers used to collect unusual tax from the people. Kathait brothers started to eliminate the faithful ministers of the queen. Now they wanted to become king and wanted to kill prince. When queen knew the evil intention of her brothers, she decided to kill them. The act of queen is remembered still today. She sacrificed her brothers for the sake of her kingdom. It is truly said that Garhwal is known for legendary stories of brave woman and the above mentioned story is one of them.

*Jitu Bagadwal* is a well known folk epic of Garhwal region. Jitu Bagadwal was a person who wandered freely everywhere for entertainment. He loved to play the flute. At the time of the rainy season, Jitu’s mother reminded him to sow the saplings of rice in the fields. According to the custom, the astrologer decided the auspicious time for planting the crops. The astrologer said that Shobni, Jitu’s sister, must sow the plants in the fields for good harvest. Jitu decided to go to his sister’s house, his mother warned him not to play flute on the top of the hills. As he reaches Raithal where after taking some rest, he starts to play his nine-note flute. Hearing the melodious sound of his flute, the nine fairies of ‘ghaint’ come near to him and sit on his hands, eyes, ears

and nose. They begin to drink his blood. Jitu remembered his deity, 'Bhairav' for help. The fairies agree to leave Jitu after making him promise to return. Jitu promised the fairies that on the auspicious day of planting crops, he will go with them. After that he reached his sister's home and met his in-laws. He returned to his home with his sister. The auspicious day for planting arrives. Jitu reached his fields to plant the crops. When he started planting the saplings, the fairies came and sat on his hands, eyes, nose and ears and drank all his blood. Jitu fell down and died. It is said that if Jitu had listened to the warning of his mother, he would not have met such a tragic end. The fairies were attracted by the sweet sound of his flute and finally they killed Jitu. It is also said that Jitu's nature was responsible for his tragic end. In some parts of Garhwal region, this folk legend is sung in the memory of Jitu Bagadwal. Fairies are also known as "Anchriyan" in Kumaon and Garhwal region. They are usually related to goodwill, but in the story the sound of flute is related to the dangerous supernatural world of fairies. They were responsible for the downfall of Jitu.

*Suraj Nag* (Kunwar) is another famous folk epic of Garhwal. It is also popular in the Kumaon region. In the Garhwal region the story of Suraj Kunwar is related to Lord Krishna. In Garhwal Krishna is worshipped as Nag raja. It is also said Lord Krishna married Suraji, sister of Suraj Kunwar. The story resembles the story of *Rajula-Malushahi*, as Suraj Kunwar saw Jyotarmala in his dream and falls in love with her. She invited Suraj Kunwar to Bhot (Munsyari) and said, "If he defeated her in the game of chess, she would marry him. When he told about the dream, She said, "Those who went to Bhot never came back." But he decided to go to Bhot. He learned 'Boksadi vidya' from his guru and went to Bhot. He reached Bhot and saw the magnificent palace of Jyotarmala. She welcomed Suraj Kunwar and they played a game of chess. Suraj Kunwar won the game and married Jyotarmala. They happily returned back.

Himalayan folk literature is as wide as Himalayas itself. It covers all the aspects of social life in a very vivid manner. The folk literature of Kumaon and Garhwal region is full of divine or supernatural elements. Oral epics express the diversity of opinions on the importance of folklore of the people. Oral epics have a strong relationship with the community in which they are performed. The community takes the oral epic more seriously as it derives the social origin of the region. The beauty of social and cultural customs revealed in folk literature. In the Central Himalayan region the folklore singers used to spread an ideology of divine or superhuman



elements by folklore performances. There is no doubt that the oral epic contains a cultural code of an ethnic group. Garhwali and Kumauni folk literature reflects the religious, social and cultural traditions of the region. Folk literature is also called 'Lok Sahitya.' Oral transmission of social, moral and aesthetic norms was important in the history of the Indian Scriptures "The Vedas". The Kumaoni and Garhwali languages of the Himalayas share and express precious heritage in the form of oral epics. There are many folktales based on the legendary stories of brave woman warriors, Teelu Rauteli is a great legendary warrior of Garhwali history. Her legend is well known to each Garhwali. The People call brave Teelu Rauteli as Maharani Lakshmibai of Garhwal. The presence of folklore rejuvenates the culture. Folk literature and written literature arises from a folk realism in literature. Since ancient times oral narratives have been the only medium of preserving the essence of culture. The traditional singers or performers successfully transmitted the rich heritage of Central Himalayas. The oral epics of Kumaun and Garhwal presented a mystical picture of Uttarakhand. The theme of oral epics is based on the certain values of folk life. As social values decide the oral as well as written literature of the community. Most of the oral epics of this region are tragic. *Bafaul, Jitu Bagadwal, Five Kathait brothers and Madho Singh Bhandari* are some examples.

Oral epics are the narratives formulated by the people and accepted as a part of their cultural heritage. After the invention of the printing press, oral literature attained new form in the form of written literature. Oral epics could be said to be the perfect blend of art and music. It became colourful and unique in artistic form. To depict the reality of society is the work of literature. But in the present era most of the Oral narratives have lost their existence. As the oral performers passed away with these narratives and the art also became extinct with them. The performer has seen, heard, smelled and experienced whatever he learns and modified it in a different way. There are several reasons for the extinction of oral tradition i.e. Migration, Disinterest and negligence of the traditional performers. Another reason for the extinction of oral tradition is the change in social, economic and cultural aspects of society. In ancient times, the folk performers recited the oral narratives word by word and the young performers learned narratives only through participating in performances with their father or guru. The art of memorizing oral narratives was also prevalent in Vedic period. Due to the impact of modernism and materialism, people are losing interest in the traditional oral narratives. Even they do not know the importance of oral tradition in any culture. In the present time many oral epics are

narrated and performed by some traditional performers. Oral epics also represent the geo-political and eco-cultural aspect of any community that connects the past and the present showing the way of future. In the primitive society where the written culture is absent and the oral culture is prevalent. The traditional oral performers possessed a great wisdom without any study in oral culture. The traditional performers connect the past with the present in their own form. In ancient times, folk songs, folk tales and folk epics were the only medium of recreation as well as knowledge. The creativity of reciting oral epics in a systematic and refined manner is extinct now. But in the modern scenario art is losing its importance due to entertaining media. Media is an important aspect in modern society. As it is a medium of entertainment and source of information also. It is unusual for people to think about oral narratives instead of modern forms of art. Most of the oral narratives are available in the media, so what is the need of exploring the traditional oral narratives? To conclude the oral epics of Kumaon and Garhwal region inspire a sense of wisdom and dignity, the uniqueness of Central Himalayas are portrayed through the oral epics since ancient times. To understand the diversities of human conditions and to get the universal meaning of folklore, oral narratives are the best medium. To preserve the customs, rituals, and values of community, oral narratives play a vital role in society. Human beings shape the physical and material environment but to understand the cultural environment, oral tradition is necessary for modern us. It may be said that no oral narratives can be immortal in the manner in which it has originated. As Mohan Upreti in his essay "Rajula-Malushahi: The Oral Epic(Ballad) of Kumaon" said:

“One should not wait for a new ballad singer to be born to pick up the broken thread. That thread is broken forever. The ballad is no longer to be re-created and re-fashioned by the in its old style. If it has to survive, it must find a place in the contemporary medium of artistic communication” (203).

It is important to realize the preciousness of oral tradition as it is also an expression of the cultural confidence in which the society remains cohesive, innovative rather than imitative.

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