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THE ORACLE TRADITION OF PANDAVAILA OF GARHWAL

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Abstract

The present paper explores the rubrics of ritual of the Pandavalila performances of Garhwal which are held in almost about 700 villages across the valleys and regions spanning over a period of 15 to 90 days as per the carrying capacity of a particular village .It analyses the methods of enactment of the agencies of the Pandavas through their human vehicles intertwined with the complex socio-aesthetic situation of the ritual. The paper also discusses the modus operandi of the agency while creating miracles and healing exercises during the ritual and also their social contextuality.

INTRODUCTION

Born out of the process of parthenogenesis, the offspring of several divine powers, the five Pandavas are worshipped as deities in the Garhwal region of the Central Himalaya. That the Pandavas visited Garhwal Himalaya during the final journey of their life, finds reference in *Mahaprasthanika Parva* of the Mahabharata. For the genocide in the Mahabharata war and for the killing of their Kaurava cousins the Pandavas were charged of fratricide. In order to seek remission from fratricide the Pandavas were advised to pray to Lord Shiva at Kashi. The latter instead of granting a remission sneaked away from Kashi and kept evading them on the way to the Himalaya. In the marshy land of Kedarnath the Lord disguised Himself as a buffalo and merged into a flock of the grazing wild buffaloes there. But suspecting Shiva to be one of the buffalo Bhima stood across the valley so that if one of the buffaloes were Shiva, he would not cross from under the legs. The real buffalo, Shiva, dived into the wet land and disappeared. The Pandavas could see only the hind part of the buffalo which quickly was transformed into a quartzite stone, later to be known as "Jotrlinga". The five brothers and Dropadi then tracked up to Swargarohini peak where as per the records of D. R. Purohit.

At the last leg of Swargarohan, the Pandavas turned to take a last glimpse of the lush green, luxuriant terraced fields, rich with the plenteous corn of autumn. A

desire to enjoy this beautiful earth again pricked their hearts. Arjuna took out his Gandiva and an arrow, pointed it at the valleys, slopes, and ridges, and commanded the arrow to receive future offerings of the folks on behalf of the Pandavas. Since then the arrow and other weapons of the Pandavas themselves visit their earthly devotees every year to receive the offering.¹

The participating communities, since then, believe that only the arrows and weapons of the Pandavas are worshipped. The spirits of the Pandavas possess their human vehicles called oracles who themselves act as agencies of the Pandavas making prognosis and healing their devotees.

The sociological causes which place this ritual and theatre in Garhwal according to William S. Sax are:

“Garhwali kshatriya- those belonging to the “class” (*varna*) of the warriors- say that they have descended from the Pandavas. To honour the Pandavs is thus a kind of ancestor worship, and Pandavilila is often referred to colloquially as a *saradhh* (skt.sraddha) the obligatory ritual of ancestor worship.²

The word ‘oracle’ has its origin from the Latin word ‘*oraculum*’ which means ‘prophecy’ or ‘word of a god’. According to *Oxford English Dictionary* the word ‘oracle’ means “a priest or priestess acting as a medium through whom advice or prophecy was sought from the god in classical antiquity.”³ Peter Sutherland defines oracle as “the one who speaks’ (*bolnevala*) giving voice to the deity’s wishes.”⁴ Thus the oracle is the medium by which the unembodied deity or the spirit talks through by getting him or her possessed. Peter Sutherland says:

The deities try to maintain good order within the community and its environment to do so, the deity must be provided with the necessary material forms, in which to anchor or deploy his power—insignias (*nisan*), images (*murti*), palanquin or *Kalasa* vehicle, different kinds of temple buildings and the embodied forms of humans, especially an oracle and an assembly, through which to give voice to power and put the same into practice.⁵

The act of being an oracle is two-sided, one is the involuntary form of personal possession by the malevolent aspect of disembodied being and the second is the voluntary possession by the benevolent aspect of divine beings.

During the Pandava performance the human agents dancing as Pandavas are treated as Pandavas themselves. Such roles and agencies run in the families: There is a Yudhishtir family, an Arjun family a Bhim family and so on. D. R. Purohit writes:

The rituals of the Pandavas are totally different from the rituals of other deities. There is no other form of idol worshipping of the Pandavas instead the worship of their divine attributes. Nor the Pandava deities have their temples. Only a hut type structure is made to keep their sacred weapons and with the extended rituals these weapons are worshipped and made dance. This dance is the sole offering to the Pandavas by which they get pleased.⁶

In this dance the oracles called *pasvas* (beast form) of the Pandavs participate. These oracles are the physical vehicle of the deities. By possessing the bodies of these oracles the deities appear before villagers. Among these oracles there are five Pandava brothers, besides them there are the oracles of the tutelary gods as Bhumyal, Kali etc with Krishna, Kunti, Draupadi, Subhadra, Nakarjuna, Babruvahan, Kalliya Luhar etc who also dance and act. Generally these oracles are males except for Kunti and the tutelary gods. Bhagat Singh Rana, professionally a teacher and native of Bhangyul village which is situated on the bank of the west Dhauli Ganga river in Joshimath block, reports that in the remote villages of his area such as Tugasi, women themselves play the roles of women in the Pandav Lila. Sax also confirms, "In the most remote villages, women participate fully in the performance but they are discouraged or prohibited from doing so in villages that have been strongly affected by the culture of the north Indian plains (usually, those closest to the road.) The outstanding exception is Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas."⁷

In these oracles the Pandava spirits appear and bless the villagers. Sometimes there are more than one oracle for a single Pandava but only one of them is officially allowed to hold the respective ensign. The privilege of possession by a particular Pandava runs down in the family runs down from generation to generation. William S. Sax writes:

There is tendency for male and female parts to be hereditary. Thus, the part of Arjuna tends to pass from father to son and in such cases the part of Arjuna's wife Draupadi may go to the wives of father and/or son. On the other hand, female parts may devolve independently from female to female, sometimes passed on in a powerful amulet or other piece of jewellery. Thus, a woman who dances the part of Draupadi may pass on the amulet containing Draupadi's "energy" (sakti) to one of her daughter-in-law, who will subsequently dance the part. In all cases, high caste persons of the appropriate gender are normally welcome to dance any part they wish, so that, for example, the main Bhima dancer may be accompanied during group dances by several other "Bhimas." In those villages where the principle of hereditary transmission is well established, the sons of men dancing the lead parts have opportunities to practice with their fathers during performance.⁸

If the oracle of any character does not have a son or even if he has one but is not able to play the part then the spirit appears on another appropriate person of the village and choose its new oracle, generally in the same lineage.

There is a normative code fixed for the oracles: "The oracles of the Pandavas are strictly required to maintain purity for the duration of the Pandavlila by remaining celibate, following a vegetarian diet, avoiding intoxicants, limiting their sleep, and so on."⁹ He further elaborates, "Arjuna and Nagarjuna tie strings around their wrists to remind themselves that they, more than any other dancers, must remain absolutely pure, lest the power of the weapons be diminished."¹⁰

The Pandava oracles contain a definite symbolical relationship with the village social status. The semiosis of this relationship is: generally the Narayan's oracle will be a Brahmin or will belong

to a senior most family of the village. The oracle of the guardian deity Bhumyal belongs to an oldest family of village. The oracle of Draupadi is a matrilineal wife in the village. Fulari, belongs to a low status family. The oracle of Kunti must be an old woman of the village, the oracle of Yudhishtira is surely a superior and respected person of the village. Shri Bhagat Singh Rana of Bhangyul village, says that gradually, this tradition of matching the oracles with their social status, is not strictly followed. Although the Pandava hosts and performers are kshatriyas and in some cases the brahmins, certain characters like Pandaun Kali and Kaliya Lohar are incarnated by the low castes too.

In this way the costumes and weapons of the oracles also have a definite symbolical relationship with the characters as; the oracle in red dress is definitely the oracle of Hanuman, the oracle wearing *dokha* (woollen half jacket like dress) and carrying a club must be Bhima or Tilmil. The oracle having a bow and an arrow must be the oracle of Arjuna or Nakarjuna; and the difference between both is that a tuft is tied on Arjuna's bow. Their carrying the similar weapon as bow and arrow symbolizes their relationship as father and son. An oracle with a writing slate is the oracle of Sahadeva which symbolizes his being as a prudent man.; the oracle with a conch is Narayan; with a basket is the Fulari; a dagger and a bowl can always be seen in the hands of Draupadi signifying herself as an incarnation of goddess Kali. Nakula's oracle carries a herding stick which stands for the local belief of his being the only biological son of the king Pandu and the ancestor of the Garhwalis who were basically the farmers and herd keepers by profession. During the Pandava dance the heraldic attribute carried by the oracles are the centre of the divine power. These do not only represent the Pandavas but are also believed to carry mysterious powers and energy. These weapons are made of some sacred wood William S. Sax observes on the divine power of these attributes:

The power contained in these weapons is believed to be directly transferred to those who dance with them. Accomplished local dancers often fall into trance when they seize these weapons: they tremble violently; their eyes roll back into their heads, and appear to be taken over by an outside force.¹¹

Peter Sutherland says, "It is said that, when the deity hears the rhythm of the drumming, he wants to dance but, being a disembodied person he can only do so by using the bodies of his palanquin bearers through whose legs he is enabled to move."¹² Further *dhol* and *damau*, the pair of drums, have an octave of notes designed separately for each character. One could easily identify a Pandava character on the basis of the beats he/she is dancing upon. D. R. Purohit describes different beats as *badhai* for Narayan, *Chandau* for Bhima, and *naag Loki Tal* for Draupadi, of Arjuna, and *sarantal* of Hanuman."¹³

The Pandava oracles possess the power of blessing. They bless the people coming from far off places to get see the performance. Villagers invite the oracles publicly to their houses, offer them a *chhaakaa* (feast), to get blessed and thus secure well being and prosperity for the family. Sax says,

The Pandava oracles ensure the health, well being and prosperity of villages and their residents, fields, and living stock. This is exemplified by the following blessing, given by

“Arjuna” to the head of a household that had just publicly feasted the Pandavas following an afternoon performance:

May your household be full!

May your buffaloes in their corral be healthy!

May your children be happy and healthy!

May your own Jayanti palace be splendid! ¹⁴

Though every domain of social prosperity is covered by them, their special domain is the protection of “Godhan” cattle (Purohit 1993). Whenever they are not pacified through the Pandav ritual, “they show their displeasure by causing hoof-and-mouth disease in animals. Or, if a cow, an ox, or any other animal is suffering from disease, it is made whole by writing ten synonyms of Arjuna on the door-frame of the cow shed.”(D. R. Purohit).¹⁵

Sax also corroborates that “during periodic outbreaks of hoof-and-mouth disease, it is not unusual for village men to gather at a shrine of the Pandavas (particularly if the shrine is dedicated to Arjuna) and promise to perform a Pandavilila if they escape the disease.”¹⁶

These oracles have healing power too. Their own bodies and the health of others get healed. Besides the healing power they ensure a prosperous harvest. It is said that a field where the Pandavilila’s events occur, is bestowed with a good harvest.

During the long drawn out performance of the Pandavilila, the deities create the unity, harmony and a sense of identity among their devotee villagers, by making the natives who have left their village or have gone to the cities to earn their livings to come back to the village and participate in the performance, Thus the Pandavas revisit time to time their descendants through the medium of their physical vehicles -- oracles. And they are pleased by the offerings in the form of dance twice a day and several other rituals.

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