



## Research Article

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## Folk deities and Practice of Shamanism in Himalayan Region of West Bengal and Sikkim, India

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**Abstract:** One of the central features of folk religions, accepted by most of the folklorists, is the earthly origin of their deities. Unlike the 'classical deities' who originate in a trans- spatio-temporal world, and descend upon the earth on a stereological mission, folk deities originate in a spatio-temporal historical context, at a very specific turn of events whence they acquire trans-human powers. They, then, progressively get divinised. Unlike the a-historical divinities of classical religion, folk deities are originally historical persons who, by their valour and courage, make an extraordinary impact on the social history of the people. Oral traditions of quite a few deities point to the fact that they were persons who deeply pulsated with the life of the community.

**Keywords:** Folk, Deities, Shamanism, Worship, Priest, Practice, Jhakri.

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## INTRODUCTION

The anthropomorphic representations of folk deities in idols are 'rustic, rude, fearful and even loathsome' to the outsider. Unkempt hair, ball-shaped eyes, protruding teeth especially those at the edges, unproportionate breasts, and a stretched out tongue, are some of the common features of these deities (Beck, 2019). Some of them carried swords, spears, sickles, or similar implements signifying the demand for blood-sacrifices. Most of these idols are crude, rustic, terracotta artifacts. While such is the appearance of those represented in idols, a majority of them do not have idols but believed to reside in certain places marked by stones that are either chiselled to shape or left rugged, usually erected vertically and smeared with red powder, paints, or covered with deep red cloths. They are also believed to be residing in certain trees whose trunks are smeared with red powder or covered with red cloth. Such representations of folk deities generally evoke feelings of fear and ambivalence. One can also sense the undefined and undomesticated character of these deities from their unrefined representations.

In correspondence with their external manifestations, their activities are also very fearful and ferocious. An important type of activity is that of taking revenge on those who caused unjust deaths to these deities when they were humans. Subsequent to their death, they acquire gigantic forms and limitless powers to punish the culprits. Intimidation is said to be the tactics employed by these deities in their exercise of power. Once the culprits acknowledge the power of these deities

and submit to them, these deities turn protective. It has two functions:

- It reverses power-relations in society. The powerless of the society is acknowledged as having power and domination over the then existing powerful group or individual in the society.
- It could further function as a deterrent to the further occurrences of such violent acts done to the powerless. They are also believed to be causing diseases, drought, famine, infertility - be it to humans, animals, or to the soil, and a score of other misfortunes to people whose submission and worship the deities are seeking. Once the people submit to them, and accept to propitiate them regularly, they then turn to be their patron deities.

## Nature of Folk Worship

A look at the external appearance and activities of folk deities presents them, on the one hand, to be ferocious, harmful and malevolent, and on the other hand, protective and benevolent. This cuts an ambivalent picture for folk deities. To the extent unrefined they are in their representations, to that extent ambivalent they are in their function (Dimock, 1962). Ambivalence is a mark of undomesticatedness. While different classical deities are relatively more refined, and to that extent domesticated, the folk deities are unrefined, and to that extent undomesticated. While the role and function of the former could be defined and predicted, that of the latter remains volatile and unpredictable. It is worth mentioning here that most of the folk deities are unmarried young virgins, while the classical ones are

mostly married and motherly. Even if some of the folk deities are married, they are uncontained by their partners and sometimes even destructive to them. Folk worship is collective, congregational, and communitarian. Depending on the nature of the deities, e.g. ancestor-deity, village-deities, etc., the whole family or the village participates in the festivals. People participate in the festivals primarily by their presence and then by material contributions. People participate freely without caste distinctions. Gregarious gathering is a mark of folk worship. One could sense the fact that the collective gathering creates a 'social effervescence among the participants. It is in the nature of folk religions to create and reinforce a sense of social solidarity among the people.

Listening to stories of the presiding deities and getting into 'divine possession' is another important element of folk worship. Ballads containing these stories are rendered through local folk art forms. Thus, in South Tamil Nadu, we have villu-paattu (bow-song) performed during the festivals called kodai. Participants are taken through different phases of sentiments by the recital of ballads. When at an intense phase, some of the participants go into ecstatic trance and become possessed of the presiding deity. Possession dance, called as being divinised is a significant phenomenon of folk worship that serves as an opportunity for mental catharsis and on occasions temporarily reverses the social status and role.

Sacrifices were an important element in folk worship, especially in earlier times. Human sacrifices, extant as recently as the early twentieth century, gradually gave way to animal sacrifices- buffaloes, sheep, and chickens, and finally to representative sacrifices of vegetables. Today while many folk worships do have some form of sacrifices, they are not as prevalent as they used to be. Due to the influence of Aryanisation, puja is taking the place of sacrifices.

The ritual sacrifice is either mixed with or followed by a ritual meal. During the days of blood sacrifices, when an animal is sacrificed, its blood and certain other parts are offered to the deity and the rest is carried home by the devotee to be eaten. Now, when the blood sacrifice is disappearing, a meal is cooked in the vicinity of the deity and a portion of it is symbolically offered to the deity and the rest is consumed by the participants (Demmrich and Wolfradt, 2018). The folk worship is not regular and defined. Worship is undertaken as and when the devotees feel the need. The devotees feel the need either through the circumstances or through special oracles from the deities themselves. However, worship has some general pattern, though not meticulously designed with rules and regulations. Folk worship is chiefly propitiatory in its intent. Fear of the ferocious deities seems to tell upon the nature of worship. The gory sacrifices are undertaken to satisfy the blood-thirsty deities. However hideous and repulsive these

worships may be, they do not indulge in 'immoral ritual practices as found in classical worship.

### **Practice of Shamanism in Himalayan Region of West Bengal and Sikkim**

The word shaman is said to have originated with Tungus of Eastern Siberia where it referred to a religious specialist who has the ability to enter a trance state in order to communicate with and appease the "spirits" for the purpose of healing, fertility, protection, and aggression and to act as a guide to the souls. Shamanism is an ancient and universal form of religious behavior, often coexisting with other formal religions, such as Buddhism. Shamanism is not a single unified religion but a cross cultural form of religious sensibility and practice. It is an ecstatic complex; it includes various forms of ecstatic behaviors such as spirit-possession, the mastery of spirits, the soul journey a vision quest ordeal, oracles, divination etc.

### **The function of Shaman**

1. Shaman is a social function who with the help of the guardian spirit attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his group members. In other words, male and female who thought his or her training or spiritual endowment is an is able to act as a mediator between member of his/her social group and the spiritual powers etc.
2. He has the ability to control the spirits which inhabit the seen and the unseen worlds, and which affect the life, health and fertility of the world.
3. Shaman is a healer. His healing role is both preventive and curative.
4. He engages in trace and séance (medium talking to the dead/spirits and receiving messages from them). Séance is used to heal, exorcise, mediate, divine, or perform acts of vengeance. Séance could be a low key affair-just a consultation between a shaman and a petitioner or could be public ceremony.
5. Divination: being possessed by a spirit or a god, the shaman foretells the future.

### **Shamanic Regalia**

A shaman often uses a particular dress, some implements, and some musical instruments to get into trance. The type of regalia employed by a shaman varies from culture to culture. A ladder, pole or tree used to represent the centre of the world. In his or her ecstatic journey to the upper and lower worlds, the shaman may climb the symbolic tree which unites the world of human being and non-human being. The most important of them all is the shaman's drum. The rhythm of the drum, accompanied by the singing of them all is the shaman and the audience enables the shaman to enter the trance state.

Jhakri is the Nepali word for shaman or diviner. It is sometime reserved specifically for practitioner of Nepali shamanism, such as that practiced among the Tamang people and the Magars; it is also used in the

indian states of Sikkam and West Bengal, which border, Nepal. The practice of using a jhaakri as a channel or medium by a Hindu god or goddess to give solution or

answers to the questions of devotees is known as, “dhaamee” in Nepal.



(Jhakris from West Bengal & Sikkim, Picture taken from Wikipedia)

Jhakri shamanism or dhaame is practice among numerous ethnic group of Nepal and Northeast India, including the Limbu, Rai, Sunwar, Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, Magars, Lepcha and khas Belief in spirits is prevalent, hence also the fear of spirt possession. Some vernacular words form jhakri are phedagbo in the Limbu language, Nakchhong, Mangpa/Bijuwa in Rai, and boongthing in Lepcha.

Jhakris performs rituals during wedding, funerals, and harvests. They diagnose and cure diseases. They are also known for performing a form of voluntary spirit possession, whereby they allow the suppose spirit of the dead to possess them for a brief time thereby allowing family members to communicate for a brief period of time. The practice is called “China”. Their practices are influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, Mun, and Bon rites (Gurung and Shanta, 2023).



(Folk worshippers, Picture taken from Wikipedia)

Mostly, jhakri use pray item dhyangro, a traditional frame drum made up of animal leather banded in a shallow wood on both side, bells connected by rope. They use Mantra in Tibetan language or their own native language.

Banjhakri and Banjhakrini are shamanic deities in the tradition of the kirati people of Nepal, Sikkam Darjeeling, Kalimpong of India They are a couple, and possibly different aspect of the same being. They are

supernatural shaman of the forest. In the Nepal language, ban means “wilderness”, jhakri means “shaman”, and jhakri means “shamaness”. Banjhakrini is also known as Lemlemey.

Banjhakri is a short wild, simian trickster who is a descendant of the Sun. His ears are large and his feet point backward. Long matted hair covers his entire body, except for his face and palms, and he plays a golden dhyangro. The dhyangro is the frame drum played by Nepali jhakri.



(Banjhakri, Picture taken from Wikipedia)

Banjhakri find human children who have the potential to be great shamans, and takes them back to his cave for training. There, the children are in danger of being eaten whole by Banjhakrini. Banjhakri is both ursine and humanoid, with long hair on her head, long, pendulous breast, and backward-pointing feet. She is usually described as bloodthirsty and brutal. She carries a symbolic golden sickle (Malik, 2009).

Folk deities reside in any place regardless of its significance. Trees, stones, waterways, tanks, rivers, etc. are some of the usual places where folk deities dwell. However, due to influences from 'classical traditions', they too have come to have temples and idols (Ferrari, 2015). Wherever there are temples, they are small, insignificant and shabbily built. They do not follow any written rules of the scriptures. While the temples of the dominant tradition are situated at the centre of a village (a traditional village), that of the folk are situated at the

periphery, on the borders. One of the main sites to have a folk temple is the burial or cremation ground of the dead. The burial or cremation ground is initially marked with stones or wood, and gradually, if at all, small temples are erected on the spot.

### Role of the Priest

The concept of the priesthood is also not native to folk religions. The rituals of folk worship are usually led by different people. Thus, a local bard may sing the ballads, a muscular man may slaughter the sacrificial animal, a woman may get possessed and become the oracle, etc. In a worship of a family deity, the elder person may lead the rituals. In a village context, the job of leading the rituals is usually shared. In possession of cults, shamans emerge from among the people and undergo various tests and finally get the acceptance of the community.



(Pujari or Priest, Picture taken from Wikipedia)

Due to the influences of the sanskritic religions, the folk religions too have come to adopt the functions of a priest. However, it is not a brahmin who acts as a priest but one of their own performs the functions of a priest. It is worth noting the fact that the 'priests' of folk religions are least monopolising and controlling, compared to the priests of the classical traditions.

### Regional Outlook

Folk deities and their religions are regional in their outlook and reach, unlike the classical ones that are pan-national and trans-national. Unlike the classical deities who exist in a separate abode for the gods, and come down on a universal mission, the folk deities are born in this mundane world, in a local context, and even after deification, they continue to live in this world along with human beings. This concept of folk deities determines the outlook of religions too. The concern, outlook, and the reach of the religions, consequently, remain very much local and regional, tied closer to their historical concern and character. Such a characteristic trait, looked at from another angle, resists the abstract conceptualisation of their religious tenets. The various literary genres, like ballads, legends, folktales, folksongs, and several other mythical narratives related to folk religions bear, both in form and content, the imprint of the local reality. To that extent they are vehicles of local history. Parochialisation and universalisation are twin dynamics operative in the realm of folklore. One can find them operative in folk religions as well. Normally, due to their strong regional character, folk religions tend to defy and resist the pull of universalization (Miller and

Strongman, 2016). That is why local religious traditions still galore in the substratum of society. However, depending on the social situatedness and the social aspirations of the worshipping community, these religions tend to universalise to great or lesser degrees.

### The character of folk-worshippers

The character of folk-worshippers is rather complex. No one category would comprehend them fully. Therefore a need to understand them from various angles. Folk worshippers are, first and foremost, agricultural peasants, living by the produce of the land. In a feudal system of land holding, most of them are landless toiling masses, some of them tenants, and an exceptional few being land-owners. In our present Indian context, where the rural villages vary from being under the grip of full-blown feudalism to semi-feudalism, and the urban centers and its vicinities turning capitalistic, they are the vast majority of landless agricultural labourers, petty land-holders, tenants, and the working class of the capitalist society. Economic backwardness, deprivation, and exploitation are the main traits of the life-experience of these people. Villages are the mainstay of folk religions. The village topography, ecology, and social environments shape the essential character of the folk worshippers. However, Indian cities too have folk-worshippers with their folk deities. It is no wonder because, culturally speaking, most of the cities are mere amalgams of villages. Villagers, when they migrate to cities, carry with them their social systems, customs, and cultural traditions. They exist as inter-linked islands. Social discrimination, marginalization, and oppression

are other marks of folk worshippers. In the Indian caste system, most of the folk-worshippers belong to the avarna (Panchama) and the low-rung of the savarna (Sudra) categories. Social inequality, untouchability, and indignity were their predominant life-experiences. Illiteracy or under-literacy is another general characteristic of folk worshippers. This makes them a people living within the ambience of orality than textuality. A variety of oral traditional genres proliferate among them. These oral genres shape the expression of their religious sentiments too.

## CONCLUSION

Folk religions are quintessentially characterized by oral traditions. The power laden oral word is typical of the folk world that depends much on 'oral thinking'. The context-sensitive oral word, impregnated with local sentiments and emotions, suits best to the psycho-religious dynamics of the folk religions. The collecting aspect of the oral word fits deeply into the social mechanism of the folk world that easily coheres and congregates. The different genres of oral traditions, and the performance of them, naturally occupy a pride of place in folk religions. Ballads, one of the prominent oral literary genres, are invariably made use of to narrate the mythico-historical origin, development, and activities of the folk deities. The rendering of such ballads by experts and listening to them by worshippers makes for an important devotional practice. Such renderings create the devotional atmosphere and occasionally lead worshippers to experiences of trance and orgies. These ballads, whose authorship is not known or not claimed by any individual, are preserved in palm leaves. Of late these palm-leaf writings are carried over to print without

losing their oral character. Folktales about the ventures of the presiding deity abound in folk religions. They are normally told in informal household story sessions so also the folksongs about the deities. Folk songs accompany various folk dances performed during the festival.

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