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WATER AND RESERVOIRS SYMBOLIZING HUMAN SACRIFICE, EXODUS AND
DISENFRANCHISEMENT IN THE LITERATURE OF HILLS

ABHYUDITA GAUTAM SINGHA

Associate Professor of English
GCTE Dharamshala
Email. abhyudita@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to bring forth the theme of water which is a sanctified symbol of the form of human sacrifice, submergence, and exodus as a dire consequence of building dams in the hills. The elixir called water sustains life but has deeper implications when we look into its multifaceted manifestations acquiring myriad cultural and civilizational connotations, especially in the hills of North India. It will explore the concept of human sacrifice for water that is practiced in the hills and also delve into the environmental hazards caused due to the building of dams that result in the exodus of the families residing in the towns and villages, that face submergence due to the backlogging of the river water, and their rehabilitation. The drowning of a place and its civilization and cultures have deeper psychological impacts on the generations that once thrived on them. Folklores of Himachal Pradesh that have been documented in books and research papers by eminent scholars like Karl Khandelwal and Vijay Sharma who is a prominent literary figure, will be described in the paper, besides the Research paper published in Mellow Journal by Kuldeep Sharma on the folklores of Chamba will also be discussed. The stories of submerged towns have been written about in various novels and books like Stuart Woods' *Under the Lake*, Mabel Esther Allan's *Pendron Under the Water*, and many such books with lakes and submerged towns in the backdrop of the stories would be referred to in general and the translated stories of SR Harnot's "The River has Vanished" in particular will be evaluated for delineating the impact of the Hydroelectric project in the hills. The Town of Bilaspur was submerged in the dam waters has been depicted in the history book and the poem on the Old Town by Shakti Singh Chandel and Abhyudita Gautam in the story "Gods Reinstated" and the book *The Town Under the Lake*, where the folksongs on the Old Town have been mentioned, will also be examined to emphasise the emotional bearing that these submerged towns have on the people's mind.

Keywords: Sanctity, Sacred, Human Sacrifice, Submergence, Exodus, Rehabilitation, Environmental Degradation

This paper attempts to bring forth the theme of water, a sanctified symbol of human sacrifice, submergence and exodus as a dire consequence of building dams in the hills. The elixir called water sustains life but has deeper implications when we look into its multifaceted manifestations, acquiring myriad cultural and civilizational connotations, especially in the hills of Northern India.

Given the importance of water to life, it is not surprising that as a potent symbol, it flows through literature, as a symbol of life, purity, rebirth, cleansing, sustenance, power, wisdom and grace. In Hinduism, water, one of the five elements of the earth, in the form of river is worshipped as a Goddess and assumes an even more important role when the rivers are assimilated into the ocean, considered to be a mighty form of God that encompasses the mysterious aquatic world and shelters the Lord Vishnu himself.

The symbolism of water has a universal undertone of purity, clarity, refreshment, mystery and fertility...Water is, of course, mutable and sublime, sustaining and destructive, and throughout literature water serves as a representation not only of birth but of death, not merely of placidity but of violence...Fresh water represents good health and polluted water symbolizes bad health. ...In literature the river is a sign of ease, grace and fluidity. It is used to represent the calm beauty of nature. Certain types of rivers are often described as auspicious and healthy...To Mark Twain water represents a boy's dreams, and a future of success. According to him 'High and fine literature is wine, and mine is only water; but everybody likes water.' (Roy)

The mountains have been a subject of wonder and awe expressed by creative writers and cinematographers in their works. Being the omnipresent geographical wonders, these forms of the earth's surface have captivated audiences with their aesthetic beauty and snow-lined horizon. The water in these mountainous regions has flowed through them as perennial rivers, rivulets, streams and brooks that have descended from the mountains as waterfalls. Water has been universally and religiously recognized as a purifying natural symbol cleansing the dirt, and of rebirth, washing the sins metaphorically, connecting people, places, and other forms of life, and inspiring and sustaining diverse cultural beliefs, values, and lifestyles. Mamang Dai writes about the rains in her poems that depict the spiritual sublimity of the rains.

Drop the rainbow down,
the rain is potent drink
for spirits seeking heavenly brides. (Dai 3)

Water in the mountains has been in abundance catering to the needs of humans, but there are many instances in history where we hear stories of human sacrifices being carried out to please the deities and gods who were believed to bless and bestow the place with the bounties of nature and water. Human Sacrifice as an oblation to God, was symbolic of the belief system and the act represents an unquestionable faith that people depicted. Also in question is water's importance, which remained elusive in the highlands that lay much above the rivers with the water table down under the ground. The areas were barren and believed to be cursed and forsaken due to the wrath of Gods which is normally attributed to the past sins committed by the inhabitants or similar incidences that may have provoked the deities of that area.

In ancient times, the practice of Vedic Purusha Medha, meaning human sacrifice has been referred to as a practice that was prevalent. The various rationales behind human sacrifice are the same that motivate religious sacrifice in general. Human sacrifice is typically intended to bring good fortune and to pacify the gods, for example in the context of the dedication of a completed building like a temple or bridge. In ancient Japan, legends talk about *hitobashira* ("human pillar"), in which maidens were buried alive at the base of or near some constructions to protect the buildings against disasters or enemy attacks and almost identical accounts appear in the Balkans as the Building of Skadar and Bridge of Arta, where a lady and a boy were sacrificed respectively. We have heard of the great wars that have been fought to capture water resources in history and how the mightiest civilizations have settled near the rivers for ages across the world. The rivers, particularly in the Himalayan range of India, have originated from the glaciers of the mountains.

The hills of Himachal Pradesh resonate with the songs eulogizing such sacrifices that are generally made by the women folk of the ruling class of the regions where the moral responsibility of dealing with the problem of the scarcity of water lay on the rulers. The common theme in the tales of these sacrifices is the strong belief in the deities that often appeared in dreams of the ruler of that area and asked for a human sacrifice from one of the members of his family. After consultations with the courtiers and the advisories, the oracles and sorcerers, it is usually decided that the Queen or the Woman of the house would be the right person for the sacrifice, though it is believed that the woman herself offers her life to be laid down for the sake of her kingdom and to quench the thirst of the parched land and its people.

The most known story is that of Queen Sunanyana who lived during the tenth century, in Chamba town in Himachal Pradesh and was entombed alive on the top of the hill overlooking Chamba town. The story as narrated through the centuries is that the old capital of the kingdom which was shifted from Bharmaur to Chamba, faced a dearth of water. The erstwhile King, Sahil Verman, constructed a water channel from a natural water source flowing along the town. However, when the water didn't enter the newly built channel, it appeared in the dream of the king in the form of a spirit prophesying that it needs human sacrifice from the royal family if the king wanted water to flow through the channel. After a lot of consultations and contemplation, it was decided that the daughter-in-law of the King would be the right person for the sacrifice. "Such sacrifices", says historian Khandalavala, were not unknown in those far off days when the divine powers were believed to speak through the mouths of priesthood leading in extreme cases even to sacrifice of human life" (10). During the Sui fair, celebrated to commemorate the sacrifice of the Queen, young girls decked in their finest and traditional costumes, sing an elegy called 'Sukraat' in the local dialect. Sukraat symbolises the very night when the water of the Sarotha nullah reached the town.

....The story is deeply embedded in the folk songs of the district. In fact, in the traditional folk song of Chamba, called Dholaru, which is usually sung in the month of March on the beginning of New Year, according to Indian calendar, by the local folk singers, the sacrifice of the queen is commemorated by and large by them moving house to house..

Kuhai supne ayi ho ranya jo

Kuhai supne ayi na!

Kuhai ke glandi oh bhayio

Badiyan baliyan mai leni na!

Kuhai appeared in the dream of king

Kuhai appeared in his dream!

Oh brothers! What the kuhai utters is

Human sacrifice!

.....The legend unravels the historical positioning of women of the royal palace where feministic stance of the folklore cannot be side lined. The folksong subtly unearths the patriarchal structuring of woman where a king was considered next to God, but for as far as the concept of appeasing the spirit for public welfare it was woman whose life was supposed to be put on stake. The king neither sacrificed himself nor his wife and son but the daughter-in-law who genetically didn't belong to his family. (Sharma 145)

Another story of a woman of a ruling class being sacrificed for ending the dry spell and rejuvenating the water resources is about Rukmani. The entire Auhar region, in the present-day Bilaspur district, was in trouble because of the scarcity of water despite their repeated efforts to dig wells. Once the ruler of Barsandh dreamt that if his son or daughter-in-law is offered as a sacrifice, the wells that have run dry would be flowing and brimming with water. The legend goes that a newly married young lady named Rukmani of Taredh Village married to the son of the Rundh family, Rajput ruler of Barsandh village, was buried alive by the side of the spot which was selected for digging a Baoli (Tank). The present Rukmani Kund, a blue-colored pond is believed to be

formed at the same spot, where she was buried alive. Due to her selfless and courageous act, she was immortalised as a Goddess in the region. People of her father's village Taredh, still refrain from drinking the water of the Kund which is the source of drinking and irrigation water in the area, adhering to the age-old custom of not consuming water from the daughter's home.

According to O.C. Handa, in *Buddhist Art & Antiquities of Himachal Pradesh, up to Eighth Century A.D.*, such stories of Woman sacrifices were common instances in which women were sacrificed to Naga Devta for the sake of water. Similar stories can be taken into consideration like Rupi Rani of Gushal Village in Lahaul Valley, Rani Nayana of Raja Sahil Varman of Chamba, Bichi of Sirmaur, and Kandi Rani of Kishtwar in Jammu who were sacrificed to Naga Devta for the sake of water. Human Sacrifices to Naga Devta have been one of the most conspicuous features of the Austric Tribes, who are believed to have been present in the Himalayan ranges in the present-day world.

Besides the sacrifice of life for water, another aspect of this elixir and its manifestation as the provider and mainstay for electricity and irrigation for the teeming millions is the reservoirs created due to the backlogging of the rivers on which the multipurpose dams are built in the mountains. Though the lakes and their waters channelised to the far-flung deserts have boosted agriculture and also lit up the homes of the lesser privileged people living in the margins, the cost at which these developmental works is attributed to the sacrifices made by the residents of the submerged towns and villages who faced forced exodus and were rehabilitated at other places. The emotional and psychological impact that the submergence had on the generations that once thrived on the old town is the subject of many novels and stories written by many literary figures in Hindi Literature. This paper has taken up the study of the Old Town of Bilaspur which is one of the district headquarters of Himachal Pradesh and also other submerged areas of this hilly state.

Shakti Singh Chandel in his book *Bilaspur Through the Centuries* delineates the aftermath of the submergence of the town of Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh that was completely drowned under water. Besides the residents' houses, monuments of archaeological importance like the palace of the royal family and temples too were devoured. Even the geographical wonders like the sprawling ground called the 'Saandu Maidan', which was believed to be the largest ground in the state and the whirlpool in Satluj River, were lost in the waters of the reservoir. The town's residents were rehabilitated at a hill above the submerged town and faced physical and emotional trauma during shifting. The impact of the exodus and rehabilitation inflicted psychological wounds on the older generation the most who had spent a major part of their lives in the old town. The book *Submerged and Rehabilitated* carries a story "Gods Reinstated" with the backdrop of the submerged town and a poem "Submerged and Rehabilitated" that narrates the agony of the people who were shifted. The book *A Town Under the Lake* is a pictorial account of the submerged town with a mention of the history and the folk songs dedicated to the old town. One has been mentioned below: -

Chal Mei Zinde

Nawi Duniya basani

Doobige Ghar Baar

Aai gaya Paani

(Jwala Prasad)

Oh my beloved! Come let's start a new life, our houses and property have been drowned as the water has come up...

Further a song by Jwala Prasad and Achar Singh Parmar titled, "Neele Jheelan Da Paani" depicts the plight of the oustees of the Old Submerged town of Bilaspur in the following lines:

Nave towna basi ne purane jo ronde .apne hi saamne apni kahani,

Teri anokhi kahani, tera bada dugha paani,

.....khatir tere tan asan jo doboya, buzurga ra sinjura bagh khoya (Prasad 24)

(We have settled in the New Town but we still long for the Old Town, your tale is mysterious and unique, your waters are so deep...for you we have devoured ourselves, we have lost the yards that our ancestors had cherished...)

The impending dangers of building a dam that brings along environmental complexities which result in the loss of ecosystems, traditional machinery and a changed course in the river is depicted in SR Harnot's story "The River Has Vanished" originally written as "Nadi Gayab Hai" in Hindi. With the backdrop of these issues of concerns, the story narrates the people's fear of losing their lands and also the environmental hazards

The novel *Paani Mein Chubhte Kaante* has been written by Trilok Mehra and deals extensively with the subject of the submergence of villages in the Reservoir formed due to the Pong Dam and delineates the pathos of the people who faced exodus. Naveen Haldvani too has presented his perspective on displacement caused by the pong dam water. Many such tales of devastation can be heard in other areas as well of the Himalayas. A dam called Surangani in the Chamba region was built in 1970 in the Baira Suil tributaries three phases resulted in the same consequences as the song below further portrays tensions that the natives of the area face as a large number of 'Kahu' trees were cut down during the process.

Chhoti-Surangani badda dam baneya

Kahuwari kuhadi ra maidan baniyan

Surangani is smaller and the dam is bigger

Forest of Kahu is converted into plain (Sharma 145)

The history of dams and resulting reservoirs is riddled with tragic stories of displacement and blatant disregard for the inhabitants of the town that are submerged in the waters of the reservoirs. Blind pursuit of hydroelectric power and the reservoirs that are created by dams submerge a vast area of cultivable land with rich biodiversity, destruction of cultural and historical sites, and displacement, with indigenous groups becoming victims of collateral damage. It is essential to tell the stories of those who were disenfranchised by dams, in order to bring awareness to the situation, push for recognition and justice and prevent future harmful projects from causing irreversible damage. The most famous of these drowned towns is the "Lion City" of Shi Cheng in China. An ancient city, Shi Cheng dates back hundreds of years and is now beneath the waters of Qiandao Lake. The city was drowned in 1959 to provide a reservoir for a hydroelectric dam, and now the white stone buildings seem to glow beneath the water. Many stories and novels like Stuart Woods's *Under the Lake*, Mabel Esther Allan's *Pendron Under the Water*, Eileen Dunlop's *Valley of the Deer* revolve around the theme of artificial lakes formed that drowned the cities and towns.

Water is used plentifully, quenching the thirst of millions at places where Queen Sunayana and Rukmani sacrificed their lives, their sacrifices immortally celebrated every year as fairs and festivals, lest they be forgotten. Much water has flown in the rivers since the dams were constructed, and the new towns and settlements have dwelled as the submerged cities lie underwater, frozen in time, sinking in silt, embedding the history with themselves. The human sacrifices and the exodus faced by a large number of people authenticate and affirm that water and the benefits derived from its tapping are far more important than life itself. Water is life but, in the mountains, life is for water.

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