

The Jaagars of Uttarakhand: Beliefs, Rituals, and Practices

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Abstract

The land of Uttarakhand is known to be the home to a number of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Hence, many outlandish practices and beliefs are prevalent in the area. One such practice is *Jaagar*, a form of spirit worship. This paper attempts to understand this paranormal phenomenon and also traces its impact on the lives of the people of the region. The paper further intends to look at how this fascinating folk heritage is instrumental in reflecting the beliefs and sentiments of the people of the region. It further examines *Jaagar* as a medium of preserving the rich cultural heritage of the state and also traces the efforts that are being made to preserve it as an important form of oral tradition. The study included qualitative methods of study like Narratology. Besides this, in-depth interviews were also carried out with experts. A textual analysis on seminal books on *Jaagars* like William Sax's *God of Justice: Ritual Healing and Social Justice in Central Himalayas*, G. Sontheimer's *Folk Culture, Folk Religion and Oral Traditions as a Component in Maharashtrian Culture* and D.S. Pokharia's *Kumaoni Bhasha, Sahitya evam Sanskriti* and other secondary data was also analyzed. After conducting the study it was concluded that the *Jaagar* is a phenomenon which gives us a glimpse of the belief, rituals and practices of the people of Uttarakhand. As *Jaagar* is an important art form, it needs to be promoted zealously in the midst of the cultural for a worldwide.

Keywords: Uttarakhand; shamanism; *Jaagar*; rituals; folk culture

1. Introduction

Uttarakhand is a small hill state located in the Central Himalayan region of India. It is well-known as *Devbhumi* or the abode of the Gods as the majestic Himalayas that crown this land is home to a number of deities of the Hindu pantheon. Besides this, a large number of sages and saints have been coming to the area to perform *askesis* which is meditation undertaken to experience liberation, since ancient

times. The land is also dotted by a number of prominent shrines and pilgrimage spots. It is, therefore, natural for a land that possesses such a glorious spiritual and religious heritage to be steeped in culture and tradition. Not only is this rich culture and the centuries old tradition witness in the folk songs and dances of the region, but it is also reflected in the lifestyle and customs of the people of *Devbhumi*. Owing to its hilly terrain, Uttarakhand has largely remained cut-off from modernization and people continue to follow the age-old customs until the present. If one travels to the rural areas of the state, one will find the prevalence of Shamanistic practices and beliefs of *Jaagars* which continue to baffle the “modern scientific mind”.

Jaagar should not be seen as a mere ritual. It stands for the profound faith of the people of Uttarakhand. The people of Uttarakhand have been associated with this paranormal phenomenon since ancient times and it marks a similarity with other Shamanistic practices from around the globe. Be it the Hmong Shamanism which is practiced in China, the Dukun of Indonesia, the Shamanistic practices of Tibet, the spiritual worship of the Native Indians or the Shamanism of Europe, they all share certain commonalities. For instance, all the above mentioned Shamanic practices take the Shaman into altered levels of consciousness, whereby they interact with the spiritual powers and obtain solutions that afflict their kith and kin. In the words of Rama (n.d.):

“Shamanic practice is an ancient practice for accessing intuitive or spiritual realms for guidance and healing. Shamanic practice is a common heritage of almost all cultures and has been around for at least 30,000 years. It is the way our ancestors expressed their spirituality and was integrated into every aspect of their lives. It is a wonderful complementary practice for almost any spiritual belief system. It is also a powerful vehicle for personal transformation.”

Just like Rama (n.d.), local historian Prof. Prayag Joshi has a deep passion and high regard for this paranormal phenomenon avers in a personal interview given to me. Prof. Joshi that this “non-ordinary reality exists and we need to approach it realistically and scientifically (P. Joshi, personal interview, 3 April 2015).” Similar thoughts were echoed by Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer (1995: 56) in his paper “The Folk Festival” when he says that “Folk religion does not explain itself to outsiders and thus empirical observation is one of the most important means to identify it.”

Thus, in order to understand this paranormal phenomenon, there is a need to approach it objectively and without any pre-conceived notions. It is associated with the beliefs of the people in the existence of some supernatural cosmic powers that co-exist in space and time with the people of today. Its importance cannot be undermined nor be dismissed as something uncultured. By examining the corpus of beliefs, rituals, and practices prevalent in Uttarakhand, people can understand the ethos of the land for it is in such folk traditions that enrich and strengthen the lives and connect the people to their roots.

This paper attempts to examine *Jaagar* not just as a ritual, but also as an important ballad form much in the line of the tradition of Bardic poetry of the West. It endeavors to understand this fascinating folk Shamanistic heritage and trace its impact on the lives of the people of the region. It also examines how this age-old practice can be instrumental in understanding the beliefs, customs, and sentiments of the people of the region. Moreover, it will attempt to understand how *Jaagar* as a traditional ballad form can be used as an important source of preserving the rich cultural heritage of the state. Lastly, it explores the efforts that are being undertaken by the social scientists in order to preserve *Jaagar* as an important form of oral tradition.

2. Review of Literature

Social Science has always been observed through the lens of rationalization. However, in the recent past, interest in the paranormal has led to research in this unexplored domain as well. Be it in China, Europe, America or even in India, a lot of research is being carried out by the social scientists on paranormal practices; yet a survey of the available critical studies reveals that there is a dearth of studies dealing with the paranormal practices of the Kumaoun Himalayas. Even the paranormal phenomena practiced by the people of the neighboring state of Himachal Pradesh and the Garhwal Mandal of Uttarakhand are researched and documented. For instance, researches and documentation of the outlandish practices of Himachal Pradesh have been carried out by renowned scholars like Prof. Subhadra Mitra Channa of the Delhi University. Prof. Channa's book titled *The Inner and Outerselves: Cosmology, Gender and Ecology in the Himalayas* (2013) sheds light on the rituals and customs of the hill tribes of Uttarakhand but the book does not dwell upon the outlandish phenomena like the "Jaagars". The book of Channa (2013) also deliberated on the ritualistic occurrences in her writings such as "Ritual Dynamics and Science of Ritual" and "Ritual Transfer: From High to Low in the Himalayas", but these works

discuss similar phenomena practiced in the Himanchal Pradesh. Similarly, renowned anthropologist Prof. William Sax of the Heidelberg University has conducted extensive studies on the Shamanistic studies of the Garhwal Himalayas of Uttarakhand in books such as *God of Justice: Ritual Healing and Social Justice in the Central Himalayas* (Sax, 2009); but has not included the Shamanistic practices of the Kumaoun Himalayas in his gamut. Nonetheless, the outlandish practices of Kumaoun need to be further researched and documented. In such a scenario, the study attempts to examine the paranormal practices of the Kumaoun Himalayas which is a relatively unexplored domain and thus is of significance.

3. Research Methodology

The study included qualitative methods, in particular, Narratology and also included in-depth interviews with experts and non-participant observation. Interviews with local exponents and practitioners' were carried out as *Jaagar* is an important folk art of the region. The seminal texts on this art form viz. William Sax's *God of Justice: Ritual Healing and Social Justice in Central Himalayas*, G. Sontheimer's *Folk Culture, Folk Religion and Oral Traditions as a Component in Maharashtrian Culture* and D.S. Pokharia's *Kumaoni Bhasha, Sahitya evam Sanskriti* and some other secondary data was also analyzed and interpreted, the interviews studied and the researcher's views as non-participatory observer noted, they all were compared and to deduce findings of the research. On a careful study of all the three sets of data, it was found out that all the three complemented each other. Furthermore, a textual analysis of the various works on the subject and analysis of other critical secondary data like books, articles, newspaper reports, and audio-visual media on "Jaagars" was also carried out, which also contributed as essential components of the research work. This was purely an academic research and fortunately, the researcher did not encounter any ethical issues to grapple with during the course of the entire research.

4. Discussion based on Interviews/Observations

4.1 The *Jaagar* Belief Systems

According to Prof. Prayag Joshi, the word *Jaagar* comes from the Sanskrit word *Jaaga* which means "to awaken" (P.Joshi, personal communication, 3 April 2015). The meaning alone points to several critical inquiries as what is this awakening all about, who is to be awakened, and for what purpose. As mentioned earlier, the

rural inhabitants of the region are untouched by the modern world and live in proximity to nature. Such a background contributed much to their deep-rooted faith in the supernatural. For instance, whenever a calamity befalls them or when the modern custodians of justice fail to deliver justice to them, these simple folks seek their answers and receive salvation through “the other world.” Furthermore, according to Prof. Joshi again, *Jaagar* is a medium or way in which gods and local deities are called or awakened from their dormant stage and asked for favors or remedies for certain problems that plague the supplicant. It is attached to the idea of divine justice and is organized to seek penance for a crime or to seek justice from the gods for some injustices done. Thus, it is evident from this description that *Jaagar* is a form of Shamanism which is practiced in the hills of Uttarakhand (P. Joshi, personal communication, 3 April 2015).

Like most other areas of India, the people of Uttarakhand also worship a host of other gods besides worshipping the gods of the Hindu pantheon. For instance, *Ganganath*, *Golu*, *Bholanath*, *Malay Nath*, *Haru-Saem*, *Goril*, *Nagimalare* are some of the local gods who are revered by the people of the region. Besides these local gods, each village also has its own god called the *Bhumyal* or *Kshetrapal* who is believed to be protecting his own territory. It just doesn't stop here, for, at times, some households also have their "personal" god known as *Kul Devta*. This god is believed to be the ancestral god of that family who protects them from malicious spirits that supposedly haunt the region. In *Jaagars*, it is usually the local gods that are invoked. In the words of Sax (2009), these local gods are “fierce and take a lot of blood sacrifice.” It is for this reason that animal sacrifices are also an important part of this ritual.

Although *Jaagar* is one paranormal phenomenon, it has been categorized differently by different scholars. For instance, based on the subject and the singing pattern, Pokharia (1994) has categorized *Jaagars* into three broad categories: *Dev Jaagars*; *Bhoot Jaagars*; and *Masaan Jaagars*. *Dev Jaagars* are those *Jaagar* ceremonies in which the benevolent gods are invoked upon the body of the medium. These gods who are invoked reward and bless the devotees present in the ceremony. Contrary to the *Dev Jaagar* is the *Bhoot Jaagar*. In this ceremony, the disembodied spirit of a deceased person is brought down to the earth and incarnated in human bodies to seek answers to the problems that torment the plaintiff. *Bhoot* in Hindi stands for spirit. At times the spirits invoked in the *Bhoot Jaagar* can get very wild

and would have to be appeased. The third kind of *Jaagar* is the *Masaan Jagaar* in which the evil spirits are invoked. *Masaan Jaagars* are usually sung with derision.

However, *Jaagars* are also categorized on the basis of musical instruments used in ritual, namely: *Hurkiya Jaagar*, *Damaria Jaagar*, and *Muryon Jaagar*. These categories are made on the basis of musical beats produced by different percussion instruments. *Hurka* and *Damaria* are folk percussion instruments of Uttarakhand which are used during the *jagaar*. In a personal interview with me A. Karki told that in *Muryon Jaagar*, the brass plate is used as a drum. The spirit takes possession of the subjects and they dance on the beats of music (A. Karki, personal interview, April 3, 2015).

4.2 The *Jaagar* Rituals and Practices

Jagaar rituals can be organized publicly or it can be a family affair. It may also span from one day to twenty-two days and are known by different names in the different parts of the state. For example, a three-day *Jaagar* is known as *Dhinali* and a twenty-two-day *Jaagar* is known as *Baisi*. Similarly, in the Pithoragarh district, *Vaishi* is observed for twenty-two long days when a male child is born or when a newly-wed bride enters her in-laws' house.

Although *Jaagars* are performed for a myriad of reasons and on different occasions as for seeking divine justice, for health reasons, for protection, for progeny, and so on, it is mainly performed to seek answers to problems that torment a simple human being. Before the *Jaagar* ritual commences, however, it is important that preparations for the event be made. In case of a community *Jaagar*, an organizer for the event has to be identified. It is also imperative that a purification ceremony can be performed. However, it should be noted that this cleansing is not just superficial but it also includes the cleansing of the soul. *Jaagars* are transcendental affairs where the gods are invoked, therefore, it is important that the person who is selected for the event be of pure soul. This person is known as *Syonkar* and it is at his home that the ritual is organized. The room where the *Jaagar* is to take place is also cleansed thoroughly and a sacred fire is lit in the *dhuni*. *Dhuni* has a special significance in Hinduism as it is emblematic of *Shakti*, the divine creator (Dumka and Joshi, 1999).

The ritual is mainly Shamanistic with the ceremony commencing with the singing of the customary *Sanjhvali Geet*. Through the *Sanjhvali Geet*, the gods of the

Hindu pantheon are remembered and their help is sought for a successful completion of the ritual. For this reason, it is not surprising that the two other essential participants of the *Jaagar* besides the *Syonkar* are the *Jagariya* and the *Dagariya*. The *Jagariya* is the chief singer who sings the *Jaagar* ballad in order to propitiate the deity who is to be invoked. He is the exorcist who performs the rite of solemn exorcism. He is accompanied by two or three *Hebars* or the *Heval Lagane Wale* who are mainly the chorus singers. The *Dagariya* is another crucial member of the group. The *Dagariya* is the person who is chosen as the medium for the gods to descend upon. The word *Dagariya* comes from the Kumaoni word *Dagar* which means "path". Thus, the *Dagariya* is the pathfinder who leads and guides the gathering through the entire process. Community *Jaagars* are intended for the protection and well-being of the entire region (Nautiyal, 2003).

Music is the most important constituent of the ritual. It forms the medium through which the Gods are invoked. The *Jaagariya* sings ballads which glorify the exploits of the deity to be summoned and in doing so usually alludes to the great Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The main instruments that are used are the *hurka*, *dhol*, *damau*, *muryo*, *flute*, and *thali*. Except for the flute, all the instruments are percussion instruments and are native to the region. These instruments are also played in the region on all auspicious occasions. The significance of these percussion instruments can be gauged from the fact that as mentioned earlier, some of the *Jaagars* are named after these instruments.

In addition, animal sacrifices especially goats were also a common practice in order to appease the deities. This is seen by many as an important part of the local custom. However, such practices are now being seen as superstitions. Nowadays, more people are moving to the "sacrifice of the self" or are practicing the symbolic coconut sacrifice in order to propitiate the deity. Yet, the animal sacrifice has been a bone of contention in the state, often it takes an ugly turn, people who are stick to customs become adamant to sacrifice animals in large numbers, whereas state authorities try to stop mass animal sacrifice (Firspost, 2012). The traditional and artistic aspects of *Jaagar* also lose its significance in such a controversy.

The next ritual that is performed is the *Birtvai*. *Birtvai* is mainly the ritual which is performed in order to invoke the deity to be appeased. For appeasement, the deity is eulogized and heroic exploits related to the deity are also sung aloud. *Birtvai* is then followed by *Ausan*, the next and the most vital event in the line. In *Ausan*, "the

deity is induced by rituals, drumming and singing to possess the oracle (Fanger, 1991)." It is marked by singing and resounding drums. Gradually the tempo of the song starts building up and the *Jaagariya*, with his powerful narration, induces the spirit to possess the *Dagariya*. The rising crescendo of the song arouses the *Dagariya* to a state of frenzied trance as he performs a *Tandav Nritya* (a fierce exciting dance). It is during this time that the *Dagariya* gets possessed by the spirits. It is believed that in this frenzied state, the spirits talk through him and provide answers to the questions that perplex the supplicant. In case of a community *Jaagar*, any villager can seek answers to his/her problem to the deity by flinging sacred rice and coin in the air at the time of the *Tandav*.

After the *Tandava*, a *guru aarti* is performed by the resident priest. During the *aarti*, *Guru Gorakhaath* who is the preceptor and the Lord of Lords is remembered. The devotees, then, ask for his blessings and protection. After which, the priest takes out the ash from the sacred fire then place it on the foreheads of all the devotees. This is known as *Khakh Raman*. *Khaak* is the Hindi/Urdu for ash and it symbolizes both purity and the ephemeral nature of this world. *Dainik Vichar* is performed next where the people contemplate and remembers God for his benevolence and bounty. Finally, the priest bestows his blessings upon the devotees in a ceremony called as the *Ashirvaad Graham*. After the rituals are performed, the answers are sought, and the gods are placated, it is time for the gods to move back to their own kingdoms in another ceremony called *Prasthan*.

Jaagar is often seen as a Shamanistic practice. However, it can also be examined as an important ballad form. *Jaagars* give us a glimpse into the folklore, customs, traditions, and beliefs of the people of Uttarakhand. Like the ballad form of the West, the authorship of these *Jaagargathas* is seldom known and until very recently, they were being transmitted through the word of mouth. However, with the advent of technology, documentation of the *Jaagargathas* is now possible. Efforts are now being made to trace the authorship of these tales and restore their original form as they play an important part in the cultural heritage of the people of Uttarakhand. The canvas of *Jaagars* is wide as it encompasses a wide array of themes ranging from the episodes of great epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* to the local folklore, such as: the chivalric Lodi Rikhola and Ajua Bafaul, or the fabulous love stories of Rajula-Malushahi, and Bhana-Gangnat, and the heart-rending tale of Jasi Jagar Gatha or Kal Bisht, including Jugal Kishor Pethshali's rendition of the Rajula-Malushahi

story (Pethshali, 1991) which is well recognized in the region and has also reaped international accolades.

Jaagars are mainly sung by the low caste people of Uttarakhand in order to make a living. This may have been a reason why this art form is not well regarded by many. Nonetheless, there have been cases where some of the high-class people have entered this profession. It is ironic, however, that people from the high castes who chose to embrace it were treated as outcasts by their own community and at times were even treated as a joke. Such derision for such a remarkable heritage is in every way wrong and should be discouraged.

5. Conclusion

After studying the beliefs, rituals, and practices of the people of Uttarakhand with regard to *Jaagars*, it was concluded that the *Jaagar* is a phenomenon which gives us a peep into the lives of the people of Uttarakhand. It helps us in developing an understanding of the lives, customs and beliefs of the people who practice it. In many ways, even the *Jagariya* can be seen as a carrier of customs of a bygone age and in many ways represents the ethos of the community. As the *Jaagargathas* is a storehouse of the Uttarakhand history and literature, they are now being analyzed and interpreted by many scholars.

Jaagars manifests the folk culture of Uttarakhand. They have many specialties of local society, based on orality, which passes the costumes and rituals from generation to generation. It has great lyrical, musical and dancing value and simultaneously it also shows supernatural aspects of the hill life.

Once labeled as crass, the value of *Jaagars* is now being recognized for their value. *Jaagar* singers like Girda, Ganga Devi, Kabutari Devi, Jogaram Harda or “Surdas”, Mohan Singh Rithagari, and Brij Lal Shah are gradually gaining recognition. However, acknowledgment has in no way paved way for a secure future for the exponents of this art. It is tragic that some practitioners even died as paupers. As *Jaagar* is an important art form, it should be recognized and efforts should be made to improve the lives of its practitioners.

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