

GLIMPSES OF IMPORTANT FAIRS AND FESTIVALS DISTRICT CHAMBA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The cultural legacy of Chamba offers enough for the researchers and art lovers. Chamba is known for its inimitable pilgrimages, ancient temples, art forms and festivals. Chamba was named after champaka flowers, which grew in abundance. The maxim Chamba-Achamba goes well with the district as it is one of most backward regions of the state. A few glimpses of culture of district Chamba are presented in the paper.

INTRODUCTION

Himachal Pradesh, one of the mountainous states of India, spreading over 56,019 square kms, is situated in the western Himalay. The state with elevation ranging from about 350 to 6,000 meters above the mean sea level consists of the drainage system comprising of rivers and glaciers (Balokhra, 2008).

Himachal Pradesh has twelve districts and Chamba is one of twelve administrative districts of the state. It is the northwest Chamba district is bordered by Jammu and Kashmir to the north-west and west, Ladakh and part of Lahaul and Bara Banghal to the north-east and east, Kangra to the south-east and Pathankot district of Punjab to the south. The district has preserved its sociocultural and historical legacy from 500 AD (Anonymous 1910). Chamba holds a distinct place on the tourist map of the state with famous tourist sites like Chamba town, Khajjiar, Mani Mahesh, Dalhousie and Bharmour. Total geographical area of district is 6,528 sq. kms. There are seven sub-divisions of district Chamba, namely, Chamba, Dalhousie, Tissa, Chowari, Bharmour, Pangi and Salooni. The district has seven tehsils and four sub-tehsils. The Chamba is located in the higher hilly region of Himalay. Pangi and Bharmour are the two tribal areas of Chamba. Pangi is an inaccessible valley situated between the *PirPanjal* and *Zhaskar* mountain ranges. Spread over 1600 square kilometers, the valley is

located on the banks of River Chenab (Verma, 1998). Owing to the tough topographical settings, inaccessible and narrow trenches, high mountain ranges, with extreme winters, this valley is one of the most rugged terrains of Himachal Pradesh. Pangi valley is divided into Sural, Saichu, Hudan, Bhatore and Kumar-Parmar valleys (Chaudhry, 2002). According to 2011 Census, district Chamba has a population of 518844. The district has a population density of 80 inhabitants per square kilometer. Chamba is known for its inimitable pilgrimages, *Minjar* fair, Chamba *Chappal* (slippers), Chamba *Rumal* (embroidered handkerchief), Chamba paintings, and Chamba *Chuk* (chutney of chilies) along with historic stone temples and Bhuri Singh museum, besides numerous tribal festivals of Pangi and Bharmour (Singh, 1988).

CULTURAL LEGACY OF CHAMBA

Historical Background: Chamba is a treasure house of cultural legacy and has enough to offer for the art admirers. It was Alexander Cunningham who in AD 1839 visited Chamba and Brahmaur and drew the attention of art lovers towards the rich culture of Chamba. Chamba remains a storehouse of arts, crafts and ancient monuments. Chamba was founded by King Maru in the middle of the sixth century. He entered the Upper Ravi Valley and after winning the territory held by Ranas, founded the town of Brahmapura (Bharmour), which became his capital. It was Raja Sahil Varman, the 20th successor of Maru, who

moved the capital from Brahmapura to Chamba (Anonymous 1910). According to folktale:

“Chamba town was founded on the request of King SahilVarman’s daughter Champavati. She was captivated by the beauty of the place. Later, the king built which is named after her. The people of Chamba still worship Champavati as a goddess.

According to another legend, Chamba was named after *champaka* flowers, which grew in abundance. Rulers of Chamba went for spatial planning with regards to hierarchical socio-cultural spaces, well-connected designs of street, and courtyard houses. The Chowgan is a large open space around which the township has come up and is known to be the social heart of the town. For the inhabitants of the town, the saying *Chamba-Achamba* (Chamba the unique) is of little implication as the district is one of most backward regions of the state. When it was a princely state, the Chowgan was used for organizing sports events and court. Now, the famous *Minjar* fair is held in the Chowgan, which marks the appearance of the shoots of paddy and maize near the end of July and is a jubilant appeal for good harvest. Placed amongst the sky-soaring mountains, the erstwhile Chamba state underwent the tempestuous days of the Sikh rule and sustained until the merger of states after Independence.

Chamba is known for its ancient temples and Laxmi Narayan group of temples dedicated to Shiv and Vishnu are the oldest and largest temples of Chamba. The *shikara* style temples were built by SahilVerman in the 10th century but later improved and decorated by his successors. The temple consists of a *Shikhara*, *garbhgrih* and a *mandap*. Another *shikara* style temple of Chamba with wheel roof and stone curving is Champavati temple, which is located in main Chamba city. The temple was built by King SahilVerman in the memory of his daughter Champavati. It is believed that Champavati motivated her father to establish Chamba town. One thousand years old

decoratively engraved Vajeshwari Temple dedicated to Vajreshwar Devi, Goddess of lightning was also built in *shikara* style with wooden roof standing on a platform. HariRai Temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu with a beautiful bronze image of Lord Vishnu was built in 11th century. The temple constructed in *shikara* style, stands on an elevated platform close to Chaugan in Chamba city. The temple is believed to have been built in primitive time and legend confirms that once River Ravi flowed across the Chaugan and the temple was approached by stepping river (Handa, 2005). Sui Mata Temple, dedicated to the queen Sui who sacrificed her life to ensure water supply in Chamba town, is located on a Hill between the Chamunda Devi temple and Vajeshwari Devi temple. A local fair is organized in its premises every year from 15th of the *Chait* to *Baisakhi*. The fair is especially significant for women and children. They sing devotional songs in praise of Queen Sui who sacrifice her life for the betterment of the people. The colorful paintings of temple depict the life of Sui. The *shikara* roof type indicates about the climactic condition of the region. BansiGopal Temple is another famous *shikara* style temple of Chamba. Chamunda Devi temple, dedicated to Goddess Durga is situated atop the hill and is under the Archaeological Survey of India.

Fairs and Festivals: Falassi, 1987 defined festivals in cultural-anthropological perspective as, ‘a sacred or profane time of celebration, marked by special observances’ while Getz, 2005, defined festival as ‘themed, public celebrations’. However, festivals celebrate community values, ideologies, identity and continuity and play a very significant role in the life of people, particularly the indigenous communities. Not only do they have religious connotations but have economic implications for the people. In India, the festivals are linked with agriculture, folk deities, nature worship and family interactions and depict the simple lifestyle of rural and indigenous communities and their proximity to nature. Fairs and festivals play a very significant role in the life

of people in Chamba. Not only do they have great religious connotations but are of economic implications for the people. People participate enthusiastically in the fairs and festivals and other community based functions. The festivals are linked with agriculture, folk deities, nature worship and family interactions and depict the simple lifestyle of people and their proximity to nature (Gupta, 2010). During these festivals people cook special food and make offerings to the local deities. People gather at a community place and enjoy singing and dancing. The festive events are organized at least seven or eight times a year, but the manner in which these were organized has changed to a larger extent because people are more inclined towards modern means of entertainment. Important fairs and festivals of Chamba include:

Minjar, which is a seven-day festival organized in the months of July-August and is linked with harvest. It is a kind of a thanksgiving ritual to the rain god for good harvest. Procession of horses and flags on the roads mark the beginning of the fair. Colorful palanquins of gods and goddesses are brought to Chaugan. People float *Minjaris* or the silk fibers of maize shoots, from which the festival owe its name. According to one legend:

Minjar is celebrated as a tribute to the conquest of the ruler of Chamba over the ruler of *Trigarta*, the present day Kangra. On his return after the triumph, people welcomed him with shreds of paddy and maize, signifying prosperity and contentment.

Another interesting legend goes as:

Ravi River used to flow near Hari Rai temple and Raja Sahil Varman asked a rishi to pray to the god for making the river reachable for everyone. He prayed to the god and performed the *yajna* to appease the god. He also weaved a long twine of paddy sprouts made of '*Minjar*', which contented the river to change its course.

A rupee, seasonal fruit, coconut, and a '*Minjar*' of paddy and golden silk wrapped in red fabric are offered on the occasion. Earlier, a buffalo sacrifice was common during the fair, but now the ritual is no longer prevailing. People believed that the buffalo sacrifice could foretell the fate of the area in the future. Carrying away of the buffalo by the lashing river water or its sinking indicated the acceptance of the sacrifice by the deity. Even if it reaches the other side of shore, it was considered as good omen and people believed that the bad luck is shifted to other side. However, the whirling of buffalo back to the place from where it was thrown was considered ill-omen. Everyone wears the symbol of *Minjar*, comprising of a silken corncob. On the first day of the fair, the chariot of Lord Raghuvira is taken along with the procession of the local deities of the adjacent areas. The festivities of *Minjar* fair go for a week with folk dances and musical recitals, especially the '*Kunjari Malhar*'. The festival concludes with the procession from Akhand Chandi Palace to River Ravi with the offerings to the river. Following the *Minjar* fair, a two days *Bhojri* festival is celebrated in Chamba. The festival is mainly celebrated by women and girls who in their best attire visit Chamunda temple. *Lishu* was celebrated in the remote area of Chamba and Bharmour on the 1st of Baisakh (April) and young boys used to sing and dance around the fire.

Suhi fair starts on 15th Chait (March) and lasts till 1st Baisakh (April). There is an interesting legend regarding the fair:

In the absence of sufficient water supply, Raja Sahil Varman was worried. He therefore got a water supply scheme made from Sarota Nallah round the shoulder of Shah Madar hill, behind the town. Unfortunately, the water declined to take the planned course. This was attributed to some supernatural cause or belief of the time. The spirit of the stream must be appeased and on consultation

the priests, it was suggested that either the queen or her son should be sacrificed. Another legend says:

The Raja had a dream in which he was ordained to sacrifice his son but the queen insisted to be a substitute. The Raja was not prepared to agree to the wishes of queen. He wanted to offer someone else for the purpose. But the queen asserted and ultimately her wish prevailed. Accompanied by her maids and bare-headed, she walked her way up to the hill to the spot near the village Balota, where the water course leaves the main stream. A grave was dug and the queen was buried alive and since then the water flowed smoothly and profusely.

The son and successor of SahilVarman, mentions his mother's name on the only copper plate of the region. To memorialize the great sacrifice, a small shrine was later established by her husband. An annual fair is held at this place.

Nag Panchami is held on the fifth day of the dark half of *jeth* (June) and snakes are worshipped. Sketches of snakes are drawn on walls and prayers are offered to them. *Rath-Rathni* fair is held on the new moon of *Asuj* (November-December). The *rath*, a square wooden frame with a piece of cloth tied round is arranged at HariRai temple. The *rathni* symbolizing a figure of woman is prepared with clothes in the premises of Lakshmi Narayan temple. *Rakhars* or the silk bracelets worn on the occasion of *RakharPunya* are kept on the *rath*, which is carried to Chaugan where it meets *rathni*. The two are made to touch each other and then the bearers get apart. The *rathni* is taken to Champavati temple and the *rath* is carried throughout the town, brought back to Chaugan and torn into pieces. The festival appears to be linked with the marriage and widowhood but has lost its true significance with time. *PanjBhikhamiEkadashi* is the first of the five days fasting which falls on the 11th day of the light half

of *Kartik* (October). During this period, people only consume fruits or grain and avoid taking cooked food.

In addition to this, there are festivals, which are confined to Gaddi community. *Nawalais* an important event in the life of Gaddis. Being a family celebration, it involves worshiping of Lord Shiva, feasting and merry making. *Baisakhi* or '*Bisu*' celebrated in mid-April and *Sair*, in the month of Sept-October are important festivals. On the occasion of *sair*, people consume '*Sur*', the homemade beer and *babrus* (deep-fried pancakes of wheat flour). *PatroruSagrang* is organized in the month of August-September. On the eve of this festival, *patrodu*, an ethnic food is prepared and consumed with *babrus*. In addition to these festivals, *Lohri*, *Shivratri*, *Holi*, *Janamashtmi* and *Dussehra* are celebrated in the same manner as by other communities. *Brahmauryatra* is a six days fair-cum-pilgrimage of Brahmaur organized after Janamashtmi festival. People gather at Chaurasi and a procession headed by the priest of Brahmaur dressed in the typical Gaddi dress, starts. *Manimahesh fair* is organized in *Manimahesh* one week after of the *Brahmauryatra*. It is believed that Lord Shiv resides in *Manimahesh*. During the pilgrimage, every pilgrim has a dip in *Brahmminullah* where incense and goat is offered. The pilgrimage is completed in two stages. The pilgrims reach the lake on the morning of *Radha ashtmi*. People take dip in *GauriKund* before the final dip in *Manimahesh*. During the pilgrimage, people sing songs in praise of Lord Shiv. Male goats are sacrificed and the raw meat is consumed.

The fairs and festivals of Gujjars are celebrated on Hindu or Muslim pattern. The majority of Gujjars are Muslims. The fairs and festivals of Muslim Gujjars are celebrated on Islamic traditions. The main festivals are *Idul-Zuha* and *Idul-Fittar* (or Bakar-Id). During the festival the Gujjars assemble at Idgaha and offer *namaz*. The animals are sacrificed and *kheer*, a rice pudding along with maize bread is served. Prior to *Idul-Fittar*, Gujjars

observe fasts and take meal only once a day before the day breaks. The Hindu Gujjars celebrate *Baisakhi*, *Lohri*, *Holi*, *Shivratri*, *Janamashtmi*, *Diwali*, etc.

Sheel or *Jukaru* fair of Pangri is observed on the new moon night in the months of February-March after the *Shivaratri*, to mark the advent of spring. The festival connotes the departure of winter and advent of spring. Villagers worship local deities and ethnic food like *halwa*, *manday* and clarified butter are consumed. With the sunrise, the people visit their friends and relatives with *sattu* and *manday* (wheat cakes) and consume these by repeatedly saying '*bhaladhada*', 'may you all be well'. This festival lasts for few days till the people have finished visiting their relatives in the far-off villages. *Pareed* is celebrated next day after *sheel* festival. Single male member of each household visits Kailash, a small stream and brings water in the pots used for milking the cows. It is believed that by doing so the cattle give more milk. Three days after *pareed*, a festival named *punahie* is celebrated. The festival is linked with agricultural activities, which are restarted on this day after severe winters. *Chaijai* festival is celebrated on full moon night and offerings are made to goddess and Lord Shiv. Use of meat and wine is common during this festival. *Uttrain* is celebrated in the month of January-February to honor the ancestors. On this occasion, people sprinkle water on the backs of goats and sheep in early morning. It is believed that if they shiver, the deity is happy, but if not, the deity is angry. A sheep or goat is sacrificed in the temple. *KhaulMela* of Pangri is held on the full moon day of *Magh*. A person from each hamlet carries a lighted torch and waves it before the nearest idol. At night, a feast is organized and the people prepare shell torches called *chaink*, move them over their heads and throw these on the walnut trees, with a belief that if the torch is caught in the branches, the person throwing it will have a son.

Hundan fair is held in the month of June and has historic importance. It is believed that evil-spirits

lived and ruined the harvest. The fair is organized to protect the harvest. *Triloknath* fair is celebrated in the month of September. Pangwals worship the Triloknath, the symbol of Lord Vishnu. *Mindhalyat* fair is celebrated in the month of June at Mindhal and on this occasion offerings are made to Shakti Devi, the symbol of nine powers. During this festival, the people do not sleep on cot, do not wear shoes and do not take sticks and umbrellas. The animal sacrifice is important aspect of the fair. *Unoni* fair is celebrated in the month of April at different places of Pangri region. People make offerings to Sheetla Devi, Shakti Devi, Malasni Devi and BalemBasang. The fair continues for three days. *Sainch*, another important fair of Pangri is celebrated in the month of April. The people worship Malasni Devi and sheep and goats are sacrificed on this occasion. *Sarjaat* is another fair held on full moon night. People worship Chamunda Devi and sacrifice goats and sheep. Singhbaan Devta is also worshipped and his blessings are sought to save the cattle from leopards and bears. Pangwals also celebrate *Sankrant*, *Shivratri Puranmashi* and *Janamashtami*.

Besides these festivals, *jatras* for instance, *phooljatra* are common among the Pangwals. *Bairajatra* is celebrated on fourth day of *Sravan* and continues for three days. The *jatra* starts by making offerings to Goddess Bhagwati. There is legend behind this *jatra* that in the reign of Raja Sham Singh, a man-eater leopard killed many people. People prayed to the Goddess Kali and promised a *jatra* if relieved of the danger. After this prayer, the man-eater vanished and people kept their promise and started organizing *jatra*.

CONCLUSION

Fairs and festivals are the part and parcel of cultural life of people in Chamba. But, the modern means of entertainment have replaced the traditional singing and folk music. Earlier, during the festivals, people used to sing and dance for the whole night, regardless of severe climatic conditions; however, the younger generation, being fond of modern songs, no longer likes group singing. The festivals which were organized day

and night have minimized to two-three hours. For younger generation, the modern means of entertainment are more appropriate in the present scenario, because these don't involve over-exertion and long sitting. Hence, they try to be more reasonable in moderating their argument in favor of modern means of entertainment. In order to uphold the cultural legacy of indigenous communities, the best of the traditions must always be retained in natural form for the future generation, before it is lost forever.

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Gaddi Community celebrating Suhi Fair



Folk dance during a local fair in Pangti



People going to Manimahesh Yatra



Women folk dancing near local lake



Manimahesh Yatra



Tribals carrying lighted torch



Worship of local deity during local fair



Gaddi and Pangwali women in local dress

Spandan