



Thematic Analysis of Witches' Festival in Folklore: A Sociological Study of Shimla, Solan and Sirmaur District of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract. Folklore represents traditions and beliefs that are done at a local level. Himachal Pradesh is blessed with a vibrant tradition. Among several interesting social practices prevalent in the rural society, there is a festival known as Dagyali which is celebrated in three main districts of Himachal Pradesh viz Shimla, Solan and Sirmaur. It is an auspicious festival of witches. The researcher highlights the complexities of this belief and practice. The focus of the article is the local folk community in the area, who actively take part in the festival celebrations. Exploratory and descriptive research methods form the basis of the study. Five individuals of varying ages were the subjects of a case study in order to get a range of perspectives and views regarding the presence of this witch festival. Interpretative phenomenological and thematic analysis is also used for the study. The responses were collected through interview based schedule, observation, informal discussions, from the rural people. The findings show that anxiety persists among people when negative behaviors gain power, and caution must be exercised to avoid becoming impacted by bad energy. Since this practice is less well-known in the field of research, the study's findings focus on the significance of the festival in the lives of rural people and highlight how important it is to preserve nature in 21st century by expressing the network of human interactions that unite people and foster cultural inheritance through folk beliefs. The findings of the study contribute to a deeper understanding of folklore, culture and society and hence contribute in the promotion of intangible cultural heritage in Himachal Pradesh. The idea for this study emerged from an exploratory trip to Solan where I encountered the captivating tradition of witches' (known as Dagyali in local language).

Index Terms- Folklore, social practice, festival, Dagyali, witches, rural.

I. Introduction

Himachal Pradesh has a wealth of fairs and festivals and is frequently described as one of the friendliest and most welcoming places on earth. It has around



20,690 villages, each of which has a god or goddess. All cultures hold what are known as folk beliefs, which are shared convictions that are generally acknowledged as true by the majority of the community but may not always be supported by empirical evidence. Folklore is an integral part of being human. It is the accumulated knowledge of homogeneous, unsophisticated people. It is transmitted orally or through one written process from one generation to other and from one country to other (Leach, 1972).

The knowledge in the folklore is the result of experience, experienced by persons, community or society as a whole. The individual gains knowledge through experience and when experience and knowledge is combined together it voices the same feeling of the society. This feeling gets its expression in the elements of folklore. Creation of an individual when accepted by the society as its own wealth, it becomes folklore (Henderson, 1912). Folklore is expressed in manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs (Dindes, 1965).

Witches have been a part of culture and stories throughout the world. The witch has a long history in folklore. However, Shimla, Solan and Sirmaur have plenty of folk beliefs and legends associated to local deities, in which local deities play an important role in shaping the customary practice and behavior of the masses. Nonetheless, there exists a unique festival of witches as well in which people worship local deities to protect themselves from the demonic powers. The Festival is known as Dagyali which is a local folk festival. This celebration is believed to be the full awakening of demonic forces. This place is inhabited by the shadow of evil forces for two days every year. Here, the two nights of witches have been celebrated for generations. It is believed that gods sleep during these two days. While traveling to Solan, I happened to witness the celebrations of Witches festival (Dagyali), this serendipitous encounter sparked my curiosity about the significance and practices surrounding this event. Hence, the study explores the dominant belief of this festival, narratives related to the practice of Dagyali in three regions, how it affects the life of rural people and what underlying function it plays in the rural society. In order to understand people's experiences across geographical regions, a phenomenological design is used (Padgett, 2008). Perspective of the respondents is seen in this method (Patton, 2014).

The purpose of this study is not to spread any superstition in the society. It is related to preserve traditional folk culture in the society that shapes the social identity and promotes cultural awareness additionally. This data can be documented and preserved to enable further access and study. It has also policy relevance in terms of ways and practices that support initiatives which promotes social inclusion. Further, this celebration provides a fascinating context for examining the belief of this festival.

II. Literature Review

Frazer (1890) in his work "The Golden Bough" explores the evolution of human thought and culture through a comparative analysis of myths, legends and folklore from around the world. He supports his argument by examining different folklores and myths including those related to witchcraft and magic. His study and



discussion of witchcraft and magic in various cultures provide context for understanding the cultural significance of the witches' festival to me.

Handa (2009) in his book "Kinnaur: Unfolding Exotic Himalayan Land" provides a valuable insight into the folklore of Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh. He explored the various genres of folklore in Kinnaur that includes myths, legends, folktales and songs. He has also given a detailed analysis of the region's mythological traditions including the stories of local deities and the supernatural being that inhabit in Kinnaur. This book is based on descriptive approach which provides a detailed account of the folklore and culture. This relates to my study as Handa's work provides valuable insights into the cultural heritage of Himachal Pradesh which is essential for understanding the context of the witches' festival in the study area.

Batoon, Issa and Ali (2013) in their study 'Sociological and Cultural Implications of Folk Tales: A Case Study of Shina Society' highlighted that there is a Shina ethnic group that resides in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Northern Pakistan. This study is important in my research because this study employs a case study approach and thematic analysis as well. A qualitative approach is used in which six Shina folk tales were selected, unfolding the messages embedded within them. Braun and Clarke's Six-phase Thematic Analysis Model was used to analyse the data. They highlighted that the purpose of folktales is to entertain, educate people, preserving the cultural heritage of societies worldwide. The study investigated the cultural and social ramifications of Shina folktales within the community, revealing complex themes that mirror the dynamics, values, and beliefs of Shina culture. My study is an investigation of the sociological implication of the folklore tradition and this study is a folklore tales.

Chauhan (2013) in his book, 'Light and Shades of Popular Beliefs in Hill States: A Case Study of Shimla Hills' deals with the folklores, beliefs and superstitions, rites and rituals, myths and mythology, legendary tales and conventions and traditions of the people of Himachal Pradesh. The prologue of the book outlines its goal. This study relates to my study of witches' festival because Chauhan's study explores popular beliefs in Shimla Hills. The book takes an anthropological approach to understand the fundamental social psychology of the hill states around Shimla. According to the author, myths and ritualistic behaviour serve as a conceptual framework for family, tribal, and communal life. Many ceremonies are carried out in order to accomplish a certain objective. The Shamanistic beliefs of the local people are also depicted in the book. These include the notion that deities, also known as devtas, are everywhere.

Ihueze (2015) in his study 'Folklore in Literature: A Tool for Culture Preservation and Entertainment' focused that folklores in plays and novels (narratives) are used to increase the understanding, entertainment of its readers and preservation of the culture for the future generation. He also highlighted that folklores used in creative works of African writers do not occur by accident rather were being



used for specific roles that they perform in our culture. This relates to my study as his work emphasizes the cultural significance of folklore traditions.

Bhardwaj and Sharma (2020) in their paper 'Gods and Cults: Folk Traditions and Cultural Memory in the Shimla Hills' highlights the oral narratives, folk traditions, legends, rituals, beliefs and practices in the Shimla hills and how they have emerged, what do they signify, what historicity they possess. In the study area, which is rich in myths, legends, and religious beliefs connected to deities, heroes, and cults, the paper explores the beliefs in the existence of superhuman and supernatural power and how these influence the customs and behaviour of the general public. The Gods of the Shimla hill are the subject of the book, along with the legend surrounding them and how they serve as protectors of the conventional value system. The author makes the case that the inhabitants in the Western Himalayan region practice polytheism based on the various religious rituals and beliefs that are prevalent among them. The study also emphasizes on the function of the gur (shama). The study is connected with my study as the authors discuss the importance of cultural memory in preserving folklore traditions including the passing down of stories from one generation to the next.

Oza (2023) in her "Interplay of Folklore, Literature, and Society A Critical Examination from Northeast India" looks at how Northeast Indian literature addresses contemporary issues and preserves culture through the use of folklore. This article offers an important perspective about folklore and conservation of natural resources. This study suggests that folklores are influenced by certain values. The paper emphasized the interconnectedness of literature, folklore, and society. It was underlined that scholars might learn more about the conservation and natural resources of northeast India by using the folklore. This paper also points out that sustainable resource management and the environment depends on the generation old knowledge as well.

Ahmad (2024) in his article "An Overview of Folk Literature in Indian Languages" provides deep knowledge of folklore literature in Indian languages. Ahmad highlighted the various forms of folklore that includes oral traditions, myths, legends, folktales, proverbs and emphasized on the importance of these folklores in understanding Indian culture and society. The study gives a foundation to my study because this study emphasized on the value of oral tradition and performance as essential components of folk literature, acting as vibrant channels for the dissemination, preservation, and transmission of cultural traditions, songs, and stories among communities. The study also mentions certain challenges in the preservation of folk literature and its transmission to future generations viz globalization and modernization, decline of oral traditions. In many communities, oral storytelling has become less important due to the transition towards written and digital forms of communication, which has resulted in the decline of traditional storytelling practices and approaches.



The above review of literature shows that folklores influence the customs and behavior of general public. There is an abundance of folklore studies but there is a scarcity of empirical research on the witches' festival. Nevertheless, the above literature has not explored a folklore related to any witch festival that connects rural people out of fear. There is a lack of existing literature on Dagyali (witch festival). Hence, this research will explore the Dagyali festival which is celebrated in three main districts of Himachal Pradesh.

III. Methodology

Himachal Pradesh has 12 districts. Since Dagyali (witches festival) is celebrated in three main districts of Himachal Pradesh viz Shimla, Solan and Sirmaur. Hence, three districts were chosen. The samples were selected on the basis of two criteria i.e. age and gender.

The study is based on primary and secondary data. The primary data was gathered from five people from different age groups i.e. Young adult (18-25 age), Adult (26-44 age), Middle age (45-59 age), Old age (60 age and above) of Shimla, Solan and Sirmaur Districts of Himachal Pradesh so that diverse information can be gathered. Two females were purposively selected from middle and old age group to know the in depth understanding of the witches' festival from gender point of view as well.

The reason for selecting only five participants was that the Dagyali festival is widely celebrated across the community, and the practices and beliefs surrounding the festival are shared among community members. By focusing on a smaller number of participants, this study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives, exploring the nuances of the festival and its practices. This case study was conducted over a period of months.

Exploratory and descriptive research design is used as the qualitative research is useful in the study which is exploratory in nature. The approach phenomenology tries to capture human experience as it is experienced, sensed, and comprehended by the participants (Wertz et.al, 2011).

A qualitative descriptive methodology is also used in the research. In this, the behavior of the participants under observation is used to provide descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words. Interview method was used to get responses of the respondents. Participant observation method was used as well. The secondary data for the purpose of present study was collected from various books, journals, articles, newspapers and websites. Review of secondary data related to folk beliefs was also undertaken.



Study Area



Study Area

Source: (Himachal Pradesh, n.d.)

Objectives

The primary objectives of this paper are:

- To study the dominant belief towards witch festival in the study area.
- To explore the personal narratives of the respondents about their experiences and practices related to the witch festival in their district.
- To study and uncover the richness of beliefs and the intricate web of human interactions that bind them together.

Limitation of the study lies because of time constraints and hence sample size for the case study was limited. The sample size is small and the participants were selected from a specific region. Nonetheless, this data can be documented and preserved to enable further access and study.

IV. Results and Discussion

Table 1 Demographic profile of the respondents

Sr. No.	Case Study	Age Group	Gender	Educational Qualification
1.	Case Study	18-25	Male	Post Graduate
2.	Case Study	26-44	Male	Graduate
3.	Case Study	45-59	Female	12 th
4.	Case Study	60 and above	Male	8 th
5.	Case Study	60 and above	Female	10 th

Procedure

The process of data collection initiated by establishing good rapport with the participants. The questions were asked in local language i.e. pahadi. Comfortable language made them to answer well and in depth views were expressed regarding the witch festival which added to the quality of research.

DATA ANALYSIS



Data is analyzed by using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used in a qualitative data to examine a collection of texts, such an interview.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Codes were developed by reading and rereading the transcripts and field notes taken during the interview. Each participant's narrative was coded using open and selective coding, and quotes that addressed the study/research questions, were arranged (Bettmann, 2015). Key themes emerged as a result of the codes, which were further arranged to ensure that the possible topics address the study questions. The themes that represented related ideas were combined into one. Finally, the process of writing begun. Hence, the findings are given below.

Detailed Case Summary of the Respondents

Results

Analysis of interviews identified into three major themes. These were: 1. Dominant belief: Witches possess supernatural power 2. perspectives: different ways and perspectives about the practices of celebration 3. Community and social bonding: connecting people making a strong knit.

Theme 1: Witches Possess Supernatural Power

This theme emerged from the data as a dominant narrative, with all five participants expressing a deep-seated belief in the supernatural powers of witches. The data revealed a consensus among participants that witches possess magical abilities that can bring harm to individuals and communities. Every participant stated that the reason behind the Dagyali (witch) festival is that power is connected to witches, and this power-related knowledge is being passed down through the generations.

Participants described witches as having the power to inflict bad luck, illness, and even insanity. Ramesh, a 25-year-old participant from Shimla, exemplified this theme: "These witches have magical abilities and have the ability to drive you insane." (Ramesh, 25, Shimla)

The belief in witches' supernatural powers is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the region. Participants shared stories of how witches can cast spells, cause misfortune, and even possess individuals. These beliefs are often passed down through generations, and the Dagyali festival serves as a reminder of the importance of protecting oneself against these perceived threats.

Subtheme 1.1: Witches as Harbingers of Bad Luck and Illness

Participants described witches as having the power to inflict bad luck, illness, and even insanity. This subtheme highlights the fear with which witches are viewed in the region. Ramesh from Shimla District explained: "If you are not careful, witches can cast a spell on you, and you will fall ill." (Ramesh, 25, Shimla)

Subtheme 1.2: The Significance of Dagyali Festival



Participants emphasized the importance of the Dagyali festival in appeasing witches and preventing harm. The festival was described as a gift to witches by Lord Krishna, and its timing was significant, occurring eight days after Lord Krishna's birth. Suresh from Solan District explained: "Witch festival is a gift to witches by Lord Krishna." (Suresh, 30, Solan)

Theme 2: Different Ways and Perspectives about the Practices of Celebration

The Dagyali festival is celebrated with slight variations across the three districts of Shimla, Solan, and Sirmaur. Almost all the participants expressed the ways of celebrating this festival is almost same with little difference. Despite these differences, the underlying belief in the supernatural powers of witches remains a common thread.

Subtheme 2.1: Protective Measures and Rituals

Participants from all three districts emphasized the importance of taking protective measures during the festival. For instance, Ramesh from Shimla emphasized the importance of protecting oneself from witches during the festival. He stated: "It becomes essential to remain vigilant on Dagyali otherwise if protective measures will not be taken then the shadow of witches will destroy their lives." (Ramesh, 25, Shimla)

Subtheme 2.2: Common Practices Across Districts

Despite some variations, several common practices were observed across the three districts. These include cooking and cutting patidas (dish made from taro leaves) into four pieces, offering prayers and performing devta puja to protect against witches, staying indoors and avoiding outdoor activities during the festival, and using protective measures such as hanging Bhekhal twigs and throwing mustard seeds and rice.

Subtheme 2.3: Unique Practices and Beliefs

Each district also had unique practices and beliefs surrounding the festival. For example, in Shimla District, Nirmala described the practice of keeping menstruating married women in the cowshed during the festival:

"People do not sit on the elevated places while the worship of devta (local god) takes places. Menstruating married women are not allowed inside the house and are kept in the cowshed and twigs are hung outside there as well."

In Solan District, Suresh explained that witches dance on the mountain known as Karol Tibba located in Solan with great enthusiasm. However, it is said that once a monk was sitting in meditation on the highest mountain of Karol and he got disturbed because of witches' dance and he cursed the witches that they can never dance and now it is believed that they don't dance on that mountain.

He explained "Witches become very strong during this time and it is also known as kala mahina (black month) in local language."



In Solan District, PRAVEEN shared that this utsav (festival) remains for two days ie chhoti and badi dagyali in which females are not allowed to go inside the temples where devta pooja takes place. On the first day dhinghade are cut and on the second day cucumber (khira in local language) is cut. On the first day prayers will be offered for the whole day and on the second day, prayers will be offered for the half day only.

The Role of Local Priest and Community

Participants emphasized the crucial role of local priests and community members in the celebration of the Dagyal festival.

In Solan District, Praveen explained the importance of the local priest's role in protecting against witches:

- "Dhyuaan (local priest) can see the movement of these witches, he gets khel (local language) and he can clearly see on whom the shadow of witches has fallen."
- While cutting the patidas (dish made from taro leaves) into four pieces, participants sing a traditional song to ward off the witches. The song is sung with a sharp knife or ax in hand, and its lyrics are meant to symbolically cut off the witches' powers.

The song's lyrics, as shared by the participants, are as follows:

- "Daagi tera per kaata (Witch, your face has been cut)
- Daagi tera hath kaata (Witch, your hand has been cut)
- Daagi tera muh kaata (Witch, your mouth has been cut)
- Daagi teri aankh kaati (Witch, your eye has been cut)
- Daggi tera mund kaata (Witch, your head has been cut)"

By singing this song, participants believe they are protecting themselves and their families from the witches' evil powers. The song serves as a form of spiritual protection, and its lyrics are meant to symbolically weaken the witches' abilities.

Theme 3: Connecting People, Making a Strong Knit

The Dagyal festival serves as a catalyst for social bonding and community cohesion, as participants from all three districts emphasized the importance of staying connected and protected during the two-day celebration.

Subtheme 3.1: Fear and Protection

Participants universally expressed a deep-seated fear of witches and their perceived malevolent powers during the festival. Ramesh from Shimla District illustrated this point: "There remains a lot of strictness in their family and no one can go outside in the evening." (Ramesh, 25, Shimla)

Subtheme 3.2: Protective Rituals and Practices

Participants shared various protective rituals and practices, including the use of special leaves (tibri tree leaves) to cook a chappati (roti) that is believed to contain



positive energy. This chappati is then placed at four-way intersections to shield individuals from negative energies.

Subtheme 3.4: Community and Social Bonding

The festival serves as a platform for social bonding and community cohesion. Champa from Sirmaur District shared:

- “I am a widow living all alone. This festival is celebrated because it has been told that as we celebrate Diwali, Holi and other festivals with great enthusiasm similarly witches celebrate their festival Dagyali with great zeal.”
- Suresh from Solan explained:
- “Gur (god’s/devta’s spokeman) do puja of devta (god) in the village and protect people whereby knitting a strong bond amongst everyone.”
- It is a complex celebration that reflects the unique cultural and social contexts of the three districts.

Pictures of Dagyali festival performed by stage artists





Discussion

The study explored the underlying function of folklore related to witches' festival. The data gathered from five people from different age groups i.e. Young adult (18-25 age), Adult (26-44 age), Middle age (45-59 age), Old age (60 age and above) of Shimla, Solan and Sirmaur Districts of Himachal Pradesh shows that the dominating power behind the Dagyali (witch) festival is the witches possess supernatural power and this power-related knowledge is being passed down through the generations. The present study explored the underlying function of folklore related to the witches' festival, Dagyali, in the districts of Shimla, Solan, and Sirmaur of Himachal Pradesh. The data gathered from five participants across different age groups revealed three dominant themes: "Witches Possess Supernatural Power," "Different Ways and Perspectives About the Practices of Celebration," and "Community and Social Bonding."

The first theme, "Witches Possess Supernatural Power," highlights the widespread belief in the supernatural powers of witches and the perceived need for protection against their malevolent powers.

The second theme, "Different Ways and Perspectives about the Practices of Celebration," reveals the diversity of practices and rituals associated with the Dagyali festival. Despite some variations, the underlying belief in the supernatural powers of witches remains a common thread. This finding suggests that the festival serves as a platform for social bonding and community cohesion, as participants come together to celebrate and seek protection.

The third theme, "Community and Social Bonding," emphasizes the importance of social bonding and community cohesion during the festival. The finding that participants engage in various protective measures, including devta worship and the use of positive energy-emitting objects, suggests that the festival serves as a vital mechanism for fostering social bonding and community cohesion. The festival binds them together to promote cultural inheritance through folk beliefs. The villager who comes across a witch will fall seriously sick or may die. Nevertheless, gur who is blessed and the representative of devta (deity) invoked mantras to cure the people

The study's findings have implications for our understanding of the cultural significance of the Dagyali festival in rural India. The festival serves as a platform for social bonding, community cohesion, and cultural heritage preservation. The study's results also highlight the importance of considering the cultural and social contexts in which festivals are celebrated.

Future research can build upon the present study by exploring the Dagyali festival in other regions of Himachal Pradesh. Longitudinal studies can also be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the festival's significance over time. Additionally, researchers can examine the intersection of culture, religion, and social bonding in the context of the Dagyali festival.



V. Conclusion

The Dagyali festival is a unique and culturally significant celebration that preserves the cultural identity of the people in the districts of Shimla, Solan, and Sirmaur of Himachal Pradesh. The festival is deeply rooted in the belief in the existence of supernatural beings, which is reflected in the various practices and rituals associated with the celebration. The study highlights the importance of preserving folklore and cultural traditions, which are essential for maintaining social bonding and community cohesion. The festival serves as a platform for the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge, promoting conservation of the environment, and maintaining social order in rural areas. The festival is also significant for its association with taro root (*Colocasia esculenta*), which is a staple crop in the region. The festival promotes the cultivation and consumption of taro root, which is rich in dietary fiber, vitamins, and minerals. The use of Tibri leaves (*Rhus chinensis*) in the festival is also noteworthy, as these leaves have medicinal properties and are used in traditional medicine.

Furthermore, the festival highlights the importance of preserving traditional knowledge and practices related to the environment and health. The use of taro root and Tibri leaves in the festival is a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the region. Many medicines can be found on the 7,100-foot-high Karol Tibba mountain where the witches' dance. All generations' people trust on the existence of this festival whereby creating a unity in 21st century. People listen to the priest and follow the instructions of him and it maintains the social order in the rural area. All people irrespective of any age group stay at home for these two days. In conclusion, the Dagyali festival is an important part of the cultural heritage of the region, and its preservation is essential for maintaining cultural identity and promoting sustainable development. The study recommends that efforts be made to document and preserve folklore and cultural traditions, which are an integral part of the region's cultural heritage. Future studies should delve deeper into the cultural significance of the Dagyali festival and its impact on social cohesion. Investigating the festival's potential to promote cultural heritage preservation and sustainable development could also yield valuable insights. Moreover, documenting and preserving the folklore and cultural traditions associated with the festival could help safeguard the region's cultural heritage. It is a festival that reflects rich culture of hilly areas of Himachal Pradesh where a witch is also remembered. There are certain folklore beliefs which are not studied anywhere but they are the rich culture which unite people.

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