

Deities, kings, and memory: folklore as a living archive in the Shimla Hills

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ABSTRACT

Folklore emerges as a vehicle for making sense of historical events and their associated practices in regions where princely and divine domains intersect, creating a fusion of religious and temporal powers. Local rulers in such areas governed territories and maintained close ties with regional deities, whose support legitimized their authority and cemented their claims to power. Focusing on the legend of Banad Devta, a regional deity, and the Thakur of Rawin, a minor principality located east of Jubbal in Himachal Pradesh, this study attempts to understand regional power dynamics, social hierarchies, and ritual practices through the lens of folklore. In this context, folklore helps to interpret popular customs and practices, particularly in how it continues to uphold the symbolic authority of figures like the Thakur of Rawin in public consciousness, even after formal titles have diminished. The analysis demonstrates that in regions such as the Shimla Hills, folklore acts as a living archive, enriching our understanding of historical events and often filling the gaps left by written records.

Keywords: *Folklore, Memory, Kingship, Legitimacy, Social hierarchy.*

Introduction

The Shimla Hills possess a rich history characterized by a complex interplay between sacred and princely narratives, where the lines between political and divine authority often blur and influence one another in intricate ways. In this region, local rulers not only governed their territories but also engaged deeply in the religious realm, aligning themselves with deities that affirmed their legitimacy and claim to rule. The region acts as a living testament to the interdependence of the divine and the temporal, where folklore, popular memory, and rituals preserve the legacy of these intertwined histories. Grounded in a shared cultural and historical context, the folklore surrounding the deity Banad and the Thakur

of Rawin encapsulates a profound narrative that helps us understand social hierarchies, ritual practices, and historical relationships.

Rawin, one of the 18 primary chiefships (*Athara Thakurais*) in the Shimla Hill States, was situated approximately 118 km east of Shimla (Ahluwalia, 1988, p. 55). It was split into two main parts, with the northern section encompassing the parganas of Shalgawan and Ratahar, and the second part consisting of a single isolated village named Salna. The northern portion was bounded by the Shilanti Khad and the Pabar River, with the Rawin parganas of Keonthal to the north. These parganas, which included the areas of Sharachli, Batar, and Katasu, were kept by the British after the Gurkha War in 1823 and later exchanged for Shimla with Keonthal in 1830. The eastern border of this section touched the isolated village of Sansog, part of Tehri Garhwal, while Tarhoch was to the south and Jubbal to the west. The detached section, Salna, was surrounded by Dhadi to the north and west, Tarhoch to the south, and Tehri Garhwal territory to the east (Punjab States Gazetteer, 1910).¹ Prior to the Gurkha war, most of Rawin's land (Sharachli, Katasu, Batar) aligned with the theistic domain of Banad Devta, the tutelary deity (*kul devta*) of the Rawin Thakur.



Fig. 1: Map of Rawin (represented by the highlighted area)

The deity's pilgrimage

According to the lore, Banad Devta was residing in the village of Parounthi, an area under the jurisdiction of the Raja of Jubbal, where a disease led to a number of cattle deaths. The deity refused to accept ritual offerings (*pūjā*) because of the pollution caused by cattle deaths. After some days, the Devta who speaks through his oracle (*māli*) requested the Raja of Jubbal to take him on a pilgrimage to Badrinath and Kedarnath, seeking to cleanse himself from the impurity caused by the cattle deaths.

सिरठी परौंठी गोउता पाए, (*As the cows die in Sirthi and Paraunthi*)
लाये बनाइसिया गंगा रे बाए। (*Banad yearns for the Ganga*)

However, the Raja of Jubbal is said to have dismissed the Devta's appeal and even mocked the deity for not being able to bear the cost of the pilgrimage. He then suggested that since the Thakur of Rawin held a special reverence in the Devta's domain, it would be more fitting for him to fulfil the request. This can be interpreted as a statement steeped in the layers of social hierarchy and regional power dynamics. Historically, the Thakur of Rawin had sought and accepted assistance from Jubbal to resist the Gurkha incursions, which led to an acknowledgement of Jubbal's authority from 1816 to 1832. This dependency was used by the Raja of Jubbal to assert Rawin's status as a feudatory. It was only in 1898 that the status of Rawin along with Dhadi, was confirmed as independent (NAI, 1898). The British decision to place Rawin's territories under the administration of Keonthal redefined Rawin's political and symbolic status and further diminished Thakur's temporal authority. The Raja's suggestion to Banad Devta was a deliberate way to downplay Rawin's independence and show that, in the Raja's opinion, Rawin's ruler was not truly his equal but a lesser leader who should be subordinate to Jubbal.

राजा कैणी जुबलीयो बोलने बोले,
(*The Raja of Jubbal then mocks*)
गंगा जोगे खोरचो तेरे का होले।
(*The journey to ganga is beyond your means*)

As the lore goes, the Thakur of Rawin, Dhian Singh (1848-1887), who resided in Chalaug (present-day Nandpur region of Jubbal Tehsil), was afflicted by a *dōṣ* (divine curse). Upon consulting his advisors, he was counselled to seek guidance from his tutelary deity, Banad.

उतरो देओ कुलो रो धामा रो ओशा,

(The tutelary deity came down in fever's guise)

राती कियो बियाणी चलाओगो दोशा।

(At dawn a divine curse was afflicted in Chalaug)

During their encounter, the deity expressed the desire to undertake the pilgrimage. The Thakur, however, hesitated at first, saying that he would not be able to bear the kind of cost required to go on the pilgrimage.

ठाकुरो पूजो ध्यान सिंघो, लांबिया लोई,

(Dhyan Singh arrives in robes so grand)

गंगा जोगे, खोर्चो मुखे ना होए।

(But the cost for Ganga I cannot withstand)

This provides a glimpse into the precarious economic condition of Rawin, which was also lagging behind in the payment of the usual Nuzzerana (tribute) to the British government (NAI, 1898). As Hari Singh has written in his memorial:

“Like all other chiefs the Rawin Thakur always and has been and is a well-wisher and Loyal subject of Great Britain, and could not have lagged behind in the payment of the usual Nazarana or tribute had the whole of his State like all other hill chiefs been conferred upon him.”

Nevertheless, when the Devta promised that the majority of the expenses would be covered by his own riches and that the Thakur only needed to carry the deity and remain by his side throughout the pilgrimage, the Thakur agreed to the proposal. He subsequently embarked on the pilgrimage, attired in the garments of a yogi, accompanied by a small retinue.

ठाकुरा रो ध्यान सिंघा, बाही के खोड़ा,

(Oh! Dhyan Singh, you stand steadfast by my side)

खर्चो खजाने रो, सारतो कोरा।

(From my treasure, all costs shall be supplied)

मेरी शराचली नांगी तारारो,

(My Sharachli, like a naked sword it stands)

जिंदड़ी नाओ पिठड़ी बदरी केदारो।

(With its grace, I shall bathe in Badri and Kedar's lands)

The thakur and his retinue returned with the deity after a duration of eight months. The journey during this period was fraught with challenges, primarily due to the lack of communication channels and the difficult terrain, which posed significant risks. The perilous conditions heightened communal anxieties, and the sole hope during this time was for the safe return of the pilgrims. During this period, no celebrations or festivities, including marriages or feasts, were held. Drums and other musical instruments were silenced, overnight travel was prohibited, and sweets were strictly avoided. The silence of festivities symbolized the sombre mood and the shared anticipation of the deity's safe return. This period remains significant to the local community, as it continues to be observed during the pilgrimages of the Devta, a practice recorded in 1955, 1967, 1975, 1994, and 2017². This not only highlights the continuity of this tradition but also emphasises its centrality in reaffirming communal bonds and the sacred connection with the deity.

The pilgrimages importance for Rawin Thakur

The journey undertaken by Thakur Dhian Singh established a distinctive bond between his lineage and the deity, characterised by a sense of gratitude and mutual affinity. The deity declared the Thakur to be his *nyāsī* (someone who sits close to the deity during worship) which gives him the authority to participate in the deity's puja within the Garbhagriha (inner sanctum), even without the customary dhoti, a garment mandated for all other attendees. Further, his presence is mandated during the opening and closing of the *havan kuṇḍ* during ceremonies such as the *śānt Yağña*.

According to Mr. Shiv Singh, the *kārdār* (administrator) of the deity, the former Thakur of Rawin was seen riding his horse to the temple premises alongside the Devta's chariot (*rath*) during the *śānt Yağña* of 1996 in Pujarli, with the devta not minding the leather saddle of the horse—a material typically regarded as impure. The act redefines the concept of purity, rendering it a flexible, dynamic attribute that adapts to specific relational and ritual circumstances (Douglas, 1992, p. 7). In this way, what is traditionally considered defiling becomes acceptable within a certain context, shaped by the unique relationship between the Thakur and the deity. Here, purity becomes a flexible attribute, shaped by relationships rather than rigid adherence to norms. By riding alongside the deity's chariot, the Thakur not only asserts his unique status but also visually manifests his alliance with Banad Devta for the community to witness.



Image 1: The former Thakur Rawin with the Devta during the *shānt yagya* of 1996, in Pujarli, Tehsil Jubbal

The pilgrimage occurred at a time when Rawin faced significant political and territorial challenges, which subsequently also impacted its economic stability. Kulke elaborates that in colonial India's princely states, the loss of political power led rulers to focus their ritual policies on reinforcing and elevating their contested social status, both within regional circles and at the

imperial level (Kulke, 2010, pp. 603). During this time, when the authority of the Thakur weakened considerably, in both practice and perception, unlike traditional methods of reinforcing kingship through the construction of grand temples or by donating land and offerings to the deity, the Thakur maintained his authority primarily through an act of devotion. Galey suggests that territorial control is only legitimised through religious sanctuaries and cultic units. Instead of relying solely on military or administrative methods to assert authority, the king's influence is affirmed by his association with sacred sites and religious practices (Galey, 1983, p. 189). In this context, the Thakur strengthened his role as a ruler whose legitimacy was rooted in his ties to the deity rather than in his control over territory. This arrangement underscores the dual structure of authority in traditional Indian kingship, where sacral legitimacy could persist independently of secular authority. This allows the people to relate to the Thakur of Rawin not just as a ruler but as a figure symbolically enmeshed with divine endorsement and ritual purity. Even with the removal of the kings and the decline of official titles, kingship of the Thakur of Rawin endures through its association with the deity.

The pilgrimage, which included both financial contributions and the physical participation of the deity's subjects accompanying the Thakur, strengthened the bond not only between the Thakur and the deity but also between the Thakur and the local population. This collective experience reinforced the Thakur's legitimacy as a devout leader perceived to be chosen by and aligned with the divine will and laid the groundwork for establishing his vertical authority as a ruler (Eschmann et al., 1986, p. 137).³ The community's collective memory continues to uphold these traditions, with the symbolic role of the Thakur functioning as a means of maintaining his nominal authority within public consciousness.

This serves as a distinctive case study illustrating the reliance of royal power on temple honours, with the role of *nyāsī* assigned to the Thakur symbolising a culturally privileged position in relation to the deity. As articulated by Appadurai and Breckenridge, the

public rituals of the temple provide a framework for defining, reinforcing, or even altering the rights and privileges tied to specific groups – in this case, the Thakur (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 1976, pp. 187-188). Kingship is conferred or renewed through specific investiture rituals like the bestowing of the role of the *nyāsi* to the Thakur, underscoring that power is not an inherent trait of any leader; only those who complete the requisite rituals are endowed with legitimate authority (Galey, 1989, p. 130). In this context, the authority is inherently anchored in temples, where the deity represents the ultimate sovereign with the right to grant titles and important positions (Dirks, 2008, p. 288). So, if it is in the nature of gods to be dependent on men for their power, it is also in the nature of men to be dependent on gods in order to manifest their own (Galey, 1989, p. 150). This reciprocal dependence not only validates human authority but also reinforces the sanctity and supremacy of divine will in the political order.

Folklore as a living archive

The term “folk” refers to any group of people who share at least one common trait, whether it’s occupation, language, religion, or another linking factor. “Lore,” refers to the content of folklore rather than the people who engage with it (Dundes, 1965, pp. 2-3). Folklore includes a wide range of expressions, including myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, jokes, riddles, charms, blessings, curses, and greetings; as well as folk practices such as costume, dance, drama, art, medicine, instrumental music, songs, speech, metaphors, and poetry as well as games, gestures, symbols, prayers, recipes and architectural styles (p.3).

Significant gaps exist in historical knowledge, and the further back we look, the scarcer are the resources available to historians. Much is required to form a complete picture of the past, particularly regarding the everyday thoughts and actions that remain undocumented. These elements – rituals, beliefs, and daily practices, often overlooked in chronicles—may not seem to directly influence the course of civilization, yet they shape the personal, religious, and political lives of individuals (Gomme,

1908, pp. 10-12). In this context, the study of folklore offers valuable insights into these dimensions of life by preserving beliefs, customs, and expressions that define various communities.

Folklore functions as a form of cultural autobiography, capturing the essence of societal values and norms, while embedding symbolic beliefs and “folk ideas” in stories that resonate across generations (Dundes, 1969, p. 471). To make unique experiences comprehensible, folklore situates them within a broader, familiar context, creating a narrative that is accessible to the community (Connerton, 1989). Bascom argues that one of folklore’s primary functions is to legitimise and reinforce the cultural practices, institutions, and social norms of a society (Bascom, 1954, p. 33). In this case study, the popular song of Thakur Dhiyan Singh is used to make sense of present practices and social norms as well as hierarchies. Legends and traditional narratives thus offer a means of preserving societal structures while simultaneously providing explanations for them. This function is particularly crucial for societies in which traditional values and norms play a significant role in shaping daily life, as folklore helps justify existing behaviours and community values, thereby promoting continuity. Folklore serves to legitimise social roles and hierarchies by narratively defining the responsibilities and characteristics of various societal roles.

This makes the ‘folk’, not just passive subjects but active agents in crafting and preserving their stories. It reflects a participatory historical approach, gathered from the voices of many contributors across various classes and social ranks (Botkin, 1940, p. 309). Folklore and its form act as living vestiges of cultural memory (311). Historical legends, such as those concerning Banad Devta and his unique relationship with the Thakur of Rawin, are not simply remnants of a bygone era; they are dynamic, carrying the collective consciousness and emotional bonds of the community within them.

The historian’s challenge lies in recognizing that folklore, though often dismissed as unreliable or fanciful, embodies cultural truths that enrich understanding. For example, the story of Banad Devta

describes how he bestowed privileges upon the Thakur following a religious journey—a narrative that signifies more than just a simple occurrence. The specific relationship a deity has with the *raja* is considered to be “historically- based”, in the sense that it refers to a particular episode that happened in the past (Berti, 2006, pp. 39-61). This reveals the complex interplay between theistic authority and temporal power, ritual legitimacy, and social memory. It acts as an insight into the communal psyche, seeing history through the shared lens of belief, ritual, and reverence, serving as a bridge between the past and present, breathing life into historical research and highlighting the roots of social structures that shaped communities such as those of the Shimla hills.

This approach transforms social history from mere documentation into a narrative with deep, interconnected roots that bring out the vitality and human essence of the past (Botkin, 1940). The history of the region, then, emerges from the collective memories and oral traditions passed down through generations, embodying what can be termed *Everyman's history* (Botkin, 1940). Thus, the folklore of Banad Devta and its ongoing resonance in popular memory reflect a history told by and for the people—a testimony to the power of oral traditions and collective remembrance in shaping the historical consciousness of a region. This perspective invites us to see that the history of Rawin and its Thakur is not confined to the pages of old records but thrives in the songs, stories, and rituals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the history of the Shimla Hills is richly woven with sacred and princely traditions, where political authority and divine agency intertwine to form a complex legacy. The narratives surrounding Banad Devta and the Thakur of Rawin illustrate how sacred and royal histories intersect, grounding political legitimacy in religious authority. The pilgrimage undertaken by Thakur Dhian Singh of Rawin represents more than an act of devotion; it symbolises the enduring essence of kingship, even amid shifting territorial and economic landscapes. By participating in this pilgrimage with the deity, the Thakur reaffirmed his symbolic role,

securing divine endorsement that legitimised his authority in the eyes of the local people.

In this context, folklore serves as a vital resource, preserving these stories as communal memories and upholding social structures that outlast political changes. Through oral traditions, the people of the Shimla Hills sustain a historical consciousness that binds temporal power to sacred tradition. Folklore thus functions as a “living history,” highlighting the region’s enduring cultural and political identity. This study positions folklore as a crucial resource for historical inquiry, revealing the unique ways in which collective memory sustains and legitimises historical legacies. Beyond its narrative charm, folklore reveals the ways in which collective memory sustains historical legacies, offering insights into the complex relationship between power, religion, and society. It is through this intricate interweaving of sacred and political traditions that the region’s enduring legacy is both constructed and remembered.

Notes

1. In the memorial addressed to the Queen, the Thakur of Rawin, Hari Singh (son of Dhian Singh), appealed against the Government of India’s order that designated him merely as a *zaildar* under Jubbal’s jurisdiction. He recounted that, following the conclusion of the Gurkha War, Rawin’s territory was severely diminished when the British reallocated portions of it to Jubbal, Garhwal, and the British themselves. According to Hari Singh the redistribution occurred due to the Rana of Rawin’s minority and the influence of his regent, who was the father-in-law of the Raja of Jubbal and acted in Jubbal’s interest. He asserts that even though territorially not dominant anymore, the chief of Rawin was independent of Jubbal.
2. Phone correspondence with Mr. Shiv Singh, Kardar of Devta Banad, November 2, 2024. In all the subsequent journeys the deity was accompanied by at least one member of Dhian Singh’s lineage from Rawin.
3. Vertical legitimation focuses on building support within the local population of a smaller area (a sub-region). Horizontal

legitimation focuses on gaining recognition from other kings, equals and potential challengers.

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