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"Nayana Rani": Translation of a Chambyali Folk Narrative of Regal Love and Sacrifice

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Abstract
"Nayana Rani" is oneof the most revered folkloric representations ofChambyaliculture. The lore traces the water crisis during the reign of Raja Sahil Varman, who moved his capital from Brahmpura, present-day Bharmour, to Chamba. When a supernatural intervention declared that the sacrifice of royal life would end the crisis, the queen offered herself. She is remembered to this day as Suhi Mata at the annual Suhi Mela on Shahmadar hill. The oral memory of a regal self-sacrifice from a bygone era, recorded in the folksong"Sukrat"was collected and preserved in a legend format by Dr Gautam Sharma as a step towards protecting a narrative that would have otherwise thinned with generations. Dr Sharma penned as 'Vyathit'is an acclaimed folklorist, playwright and poet from Himachal Pradesh. He has published several books on folk literature, ghazals and poems on different aspects of life. Dr Vyathit was recognised by Sahitya Akademi with the Bhasha Samman for his contribution towards preserving the Himachali language and culture. This story is translated from his collection titled Chaupal, published in 2003. Methods such as borrowing, thick translation, foreignization, semantic translation, contextual glossing and literal translation are used throughout to ensure that the culture-bound vocabulary of the tale reaches the English reader without losing its ritual, ecological and gendered meanings. The translation, thus, transfers culture and traditions to a widespread readership while retaining its local identity.
Keywords: Nayana Rani, Chambayali Culture,Suhi Mata, Dr Gautam Sharma "Vyathit",Chaupal

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Nayana Rani

Legend has it that this town once had a scarcity of drinking water. Consequently, the townsfolk faced immense hardships due to the water crisis. The king grieved deeply upon witnessing the suffering of his people and resolved to find a permanent and satisfactory solution to the problem. He ordered a widespread search for water sources throughout the surrounding regions. At last, word arrived that a river named "Sarohta" flowed on the far side of the Shahmadar hill. The king immediately held counsel with his ministers, proposing that they carve a canal to channel the waters of this very river directly into the town. Upon learning of this decision, a wave of profound joy swept across the entire kingdom.

The hill was dug and a kuhal[1] was carved out, but when water was released, itdidn't move forward. Great efforts were made, but it was a matter of surprise that the water did not move forward at all. Soon, many folk beliefs emerged. Votive offerings were made to the devta[2], and khel–patar[3] was also held. Suggestions poured in, one after another. The tale further recounts that the king had a sunindra[4].For the worried king this too was possible. In the dream, someone spoke to him: "O King! If you carry out the remedy, this resolve of yours shall be fulfilled."

The king answered the shadow that had emerged in his dream: "I am ready to carry out every remedy. For the welfare of my people, I am prepared to abnegateeverything."

The shadow declared: "Only if someone from the royal lineage is offered as the sacrifice then only will the water reach Chamba town; otherwise, it never shall." The king solemnly assured the shadow that it would be so.

As morning came, seeing the king gripped by anxiety, the queen asked for its cause.The king recounted the previous night's dream and expressed his wish to offer himself as the sacrifice.

But the queen retorted: "Maharaj[5]! While I am alive, your sacrifice is not possible. For the happiness of our people, I willsacrifice my life. Moreover, for the people, your life is far more important than mine."

The king tried to dissuade the queen, reasoning that the duty and dharma[6] of a king lies in remaining alive for his people. A king whose peopleare unhappy, he is condemned to endure hell.He has no right to remain alive. Therefore, my sacrifice would be far more meaningful.

But the queen counteredagain: "If, in obedience to my husband's command, I give up my life for the welfare of our people, then no higher paradise could ever exist for me."

Moved by such a reasoned reply from the queen, the king said: "Very well then, as you wish! Sadaamar raho[7]!!"

To give up one's life for the welfare of the people was the tradition of this royal lineage.The queen readied herself for this act. The day was fixed. In keeping with the custom of sacrifice, the queen was adorned in suhag[8] garments, and all the shagun[9] were duly performed. The queen was taken barefoot up the unpaved steps built above the town. At a place constructed along those steps, she was made to rest. Her handmaidens accompanied, as though they too were going to become sati[11]. From there, the queen was taken across the nullah to the source of the kuhal. The place is named "Balodha", and a samadhi[10] had also been built there. Seated right there, the queen performed ritual worship. Not a trace of gloom born of worry, fear or sorrow could be seen on her face. Just as the sun retains the same crimson hue at both dawn and dusk, the queen remained entirely untouched by sorrow.

Through this auspicious deed, the queen was bestowing immortality upon her life. She was to become immortal within her own lifetime. Folk storytellers recount that on one side the queen was given samadhi, and on the other, at that very moment, the stream of water began to flow towards Chamba town. Local folk songwriters immortalised this event in a song that is still heard and sung with devout faith today.

Every year, at the close of the month of Chaitra[11], the Suhi Mela[12] is held in Chamba. Even today, the women of the tribal communities settled in Churah, Bharmour and Bhatiyat of the Chambariyasat[13], adorned in traditional attire, offer shraddhanjali[14] to their Sati Rani; and once again the immortal story of Rani Nayana Devi's sacrifice comes alive on their lips. In the heart-rending words and voice of the "Sukrat"[15] folk song, it refreshes the memory of the sacrifice that took place 1200 years ago. Along every path of Chamba town, nestled in the lap of the hills of Chamba, this same voice is heard.

Sukratkudiyochidiyo, sukrat Lakshmi Narayana ho!!
Thanda panikihyankari pina ho,
Terenainaheri–herijinaho!!!

Perhaps the folk song conveys just this: "O Rani! How can we ever drink this cold water that came forth in the form of your sacrifice? Far better it would have been had you remained alive, so that we might have lived on the mere glimpse of your eyes!! Quenching our thirst!!"

Notes :

1. kuhal: a traditional gravity-fed irrigation channel of the western Himalaya, cut to divert water from a stream or river.
2. khel–patar: a ritual consultation of the local deity, who is believed to speak through a shaman and reveal the cause of a misfortune and its remedy.
3. sunindra: here, an auspicious or prophetic dream.
4. Maharaj: great king; a respectful form of address for a ruler, also used by a queen for her husband.
5. dharma: here, the sacred duties, ethical responsibilities, and political code of conduct that a king must follow to maintain cosmic order, justice, and the welfare of his subjects.
6. Sadaamarraho: may you remain immortal forever; a blessing.
7. suhag: the attire and adornments of a married woman whose husband is living.
8. shagun: auspicious rites and customs performed before a significant undertaking.
9. sati: virtuous woman; a woman who gives up her life in self-sacrifice.
10. samadhi: a physical monumentor memorial shrine erected over the final resting place of a revered individualwho has passed away or sacrificed their life for a sacred cause.
11. Chaitra: the first month of the Hindu lunar calendar, falling in March–April.
12. Sui Mela: the annual fair held in Chamba in memory of the queen's sacrifice.
13. riyasat: a princely statein pre-independence British India ruled by a local monarch, raja, or nawab under British paramountcy.
14. shraddhanjali: a tribute of reverence offered to the departed.
15. Sukrat: the folk song sung in memory of the queen, named after its opening refrain.

Work Cited

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