

“Shakunakharas:” Translating the Ritual Folk Songs from the Central Himalayan Region of Kumaon

[Translated by Shruti Pant Banerjee and Dr. Hari Priya Pathak]

Translator’s Note

The oral culture of the Central Himalayan region of Kumaon survives mainly due to its folk songs, which represent the true spirit of Kumauni life by reflecting the daily struggles, beliefs and superstitions, customs and rituals, and the popular legends and myths of the region. However, there are a variety of folk songs which are sung on specific occasions and have a particular social function. In the following paper, we have attempted to present the translations of some of these popular folk ritual songs called the *Shakunakharas*.

Shakunakhara literally translates to “auspicious utterance.” These ritual folk songs, usually sung by women, mark the initiation of major life *samskaras*, such as childbirth, naming ceremony, thread ceremony, and marriage. Local gods, village deities, ancestors and kin are invited to partake in the festivities, and their blessings are sought. Apart from the ritual and cultural significance, *Shakunakharas* also allude to the values of reverence for nature and its resources, sustainable living, and environmental conservation.

Due to geographical and political seclusion, the Central Himalayan region of Kumaon has also faced cultural isolation for a very long time. This perhaps can be attributed to its exclusion from the 8th schedule of our Constitution and its integration with Hindi culture and language, making it more urgent to translate, document, digitise, and archive Kumauni folklore.

Our work is dedicated to translating as closely as possible the cultural nuances associated with these ritual folk songs (*Shakunakharas*) by remaining faithful to their original meaning. This will present before the readers a glimpse of the cultural and religious beliefs of the Kumauni community and, in doing so, will further reveal the socio-psychological constructs of Kumauni folk life and its people. Various translation techniques are used, some of which include foreignisation, compensation, borrowing, and literary amplification.

In the following translations, the use of various literary devices is evident. Repetition, a characteristic of folk songs that enhances the rhythm and flow, can also be seen in various places. This has been deliberately done to keep the musical traits of the *Shakunakharas* intact.

Incantation

The first *Shakunakhara*, “*Shakuna De*,” is sung before the initiation of all auspicious ceremonies. As this incantation is sung in a mellow voice, the names of all ancestors and family members are taken to seek their blessings and cooperation in the successful accomplishment of the ceremony. This *Shakunakhara* eulogises various cultural symbols such as the magnificent sounding conch shells, bells and the auspicious *Pichora*.¹ The eternal-sounding conch shell and bells symbolise purity and optimism, respectively, and the *Pichora* is a symbol of prosperity. The following *Shakunakhara* also sheds light on the importance accorded to a male child in the Kumauni community, when towards the end, the women signing the *Shakunakhara* pray that their daughters-in-law be blessed with virtuous sons.

Shower your blessings, shower your blessings,

shower them on this ritual sacred.

The majestic conch shell sounds on our right,

and — the *kalash*² brims with holy water.

Enveloped in a deep-dyed *pichora* is our bosom,
and the flower of lotus on our womb,
springing forth the life force,
of generations noble, like the eternal living brothers,
Ganesha,³ *Ram Chandra*,⁴ *Lakshmana*,⁵ *Bharata*,⁶ *Shatrughana*,⁷ *Lava* and *Kusha*;⁸
sustained and nurtured by *Riddhi Siddhi*⁹ and *Goddess Sita*.¹⁰
May our daughters-in-law, live long,
and with virtuous sons be blessed.

Invitation

The following *Shakunakhara* is sung to extend invitation and gratitude towards the various elements of nature that sustain and nurture life forms, as well as to family members, well-wishers, and members of various sections of the community for their numerous contributions. The following *Shakunakhara* depicts the reverence and humility which Kumauni folks have for their environment and for each other.

Let us send invitations on this joyous occasion,
let the invitations be sent to all today.
At the rise of dawn, we invite the sun,
at dusk, invitation we send to the moon.
The rays of the sun, deserve our invitation,
the stars, deserve the calling we send.
Let us send invitations on this joyous occasion,
let the invitations be sent to all today.
Invitations we send to *Ganpati*,
*Brahma*¹¹ and *Vishnu*,¹² we invoke devotedly,
seeking their benediction, to grace this holy tradition.
Ganpati with him begets *Siddhi*,
while *Brahma* and *Vishnu*, compose the creation.
Let us send invitations on this joyous occasion,
let the invitations be sent to all today.
Brahmins,¹³ we invite on this holy occasion,
and to the belles we send our invitation,
the brides we call upon to grace the ceremony,
and to adorn these rituals holy,
invitations we send to the majestic conch shells and bells.
Let the *Brahmins* chant the Vedas,

and the belles' light earthen lamps,
let the brides sing the ritual songs,
and the majestic conch shells and bells resonate.
Let us send invitations on this joyous occasion,
let the invitations be sent to all today.
The gardener, we invite on this occasion,
and to the potteress, we send our invitation,
milkmaid we call upon to grace the ceremony,
and to adorn these rituals holy,
invitations we send to the fisherwomen.
Let the gardener yield the winsome flowers,
and the potteress fetch the *kalash* sacred,
let the milkmaid bring the nourishing milk,
and prosperity does the fisherwomen bring.
Let us send invitations on this joyous occasion,
let the invitations be sent to all today.
The fromager we invite on this occasion,
to the carpenter, we send our invitation,
our sisters we call upon to grace the ceremony,
and to adorn this ritual holy,
invitations we send to our merry kinsmen.
Let the fromager bring the fresh curd,
and the carpenter the sacred *chowki*,¹⁴
let our sisters dance in joy,
and the occasion our kinsmen adorn.
Let us send invitations on this joyous occasion,
let the invitations be sent to all today.
We send the merry invitations, to the band of musicians,
with their musical instruments, they sing on the porch,
"May the ceremonies betide, as days pass by,
with each passing day, let the ceremonies betide."
Let us send invitations on this joyous occasion,
let the invitations be sent to all today.

To Mother: A Reverence

One of the many rituals performed at the beginning of major life *samskaras* is the *Matra Pujan*, or the worship of motherhood. Sixteen *Matrikas*¹⁵ (geometric lines), symbolising the sixteen incarnations of motherhood, are invoked. These sacred incarnations of the Goddess are credited with the creation and preservation of all life forms. The following *Shakunakhara* sheds light on the status accorded to women and the gender roles that she has been assigned in the Kumauni society, wherein she is regarded as a creator, nurturer, and the bearer of prosperity.

Who begets this wide world?
The mother holy, the Goddess mother.
Whose womb bore a son like *Narayan*?
The womb of *Kausalya*¹⁶ bore,
the womb of *Sumitra*¹⁷ begot,
a son like *Ramchandra*,
and a son like *Lakshmana*.
The mother holy begot this wide world,
the Goddess mother, our mother holy.
O, the blessed incarnations of Mother,
may you come to the house to grace,
and bless the homely holy deed.
Your presence adorns this sacred space,
And prosperity fills the humble place.

Consecration

Kalash Sthapan, or consecrating the sacred pitcher, is a ritual performed before the initiation of ritual ceremonies. In the following *Shakunakhara*, women call upon the names of the holy items used in this consecration ceremony. Reverence of natural resources and planet Earth can be observed in the following folk song.

Upon the sacred fertile earth,
let us consecrate the *kalash* with mirth.
Let the sanctified tree of fig, and the revered mango twigs,
infuse the sacred consecrated *kalash*.
With the sacred waters of Ganges, and the fertile mud,
let us consecrate this holy *kalash*.
On this glorious joyous day, place the *kalash* consecrated,
upon the sacred fertile earth.
Let the amber mustard flowers, and the golden barley bowers,
suffuse the sacred consecrated *kalash*.

With the healing turmeric roots, and the sacred grass of doob,
let us consecrated this *kalash* holy.
On this glorious joyous day, place the *kalash* consecrated
upon the sacred fertile earth.
Let the nurturing curd and milk, and the rich fabrics of silk
sanctify the sacred consecrated *kalash*.
With the flowers winsome, *akshat*¹⁸ and sacred crimson,
let us consecrate this *kalash* holy,
on this glorious joyous day, place the *kalash* consecrated,
upon the sacred fertile earth.
Let us consecrate the holy *kalash*,
with the ringing of the bells and the blowing of conch shells,
while the *Brahmins* chant the *Vedas*, and the brides sing ritual songs.
We place this *kalash* consecrated, upon the sacred fertile earth,
on this glorious joyous day.
Wither this consecrated *kalash* be placed,
may wealth and prosperity reign that space.

Veneration and Grounding

On the day of the naming ceremony or the *Namkaran samskara*, the rituals of *Surya Darshan*¹⁹ and *Bhumi Sparsh*²⁰ are performed. The newborn is taken out of the house for the first time, and is made to offer *Surya-argh*²¹ with water. The child is then made to touch the earth and seek her forgiveness for she will bear the child throughout its life.

The following *Shakunakhara* depicts the newborn's eagerness to step out into the sun and present their offerings to the Sun God.

The rays of sun are shining bright,
O dear mother, what a joyous sight!
Unlock the doors, and let me out,
sincere offerings to the sun I pay throughout.
Forge a golden *argh*,²² O goldsmith dear,
to the mighty sun I may present offerings sincere.
Give me a coin from the coffer,
to present the mighty sun my sincere offer.

Notes on the Kumauni Words

¹ *Pichora*: A deep yellow coloured wrap with red dots. It is worn by Kumauni married women during auspicious ceremonies.

² *Kalash*: A metal pitcher usually made of brass or copper.

³ *Ganesha / Ganapati*: Younger son of Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Parvati, identified with an elephant head.

⁴ *Ram Chandra / Rama*: Protagonist of the epic *Ramayana*, King of Ajodhya, and son of King Dashrath and his elder Queen Kaushalya, revered as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

⁵ *Lakshmana*: Younger half-brother of Lord Rama, son of King Dashrath and his youngest queen Sumitra.

⁶ *Bharata*: Younger half-brother of Lord Rama, son of King Dashrath and his queen Kaikeyi.

⁷ *Shatrughana*: Younger half-brother of Lord Rama, son of King Dashrath and his youngest queen Sumitra.

⁸ *Luva and Kusha*: Sons of Lord Rama and his Queen Consort Sita, born at Sage Valmiki's Ashram while Sita was banished from Ajodhya.

⁹ *Riddhi Siddhi / Siddhi*: The wife of Ganesha is portrayed as his Shakti — a personification of his own creative energy.

¹⁰ *Sita*: Queen consort of Lord Rama of Ajodhya, and female protagonist of *Ramayana*. Sita is revered as the daughter of Mother Earth, who was fostered by King Janak and Queen Sunayana of Mithila.

¹¹ *Brahma*: Revered as the creator and associated with knowledge and the Vedas, is one of the Gods of the Hindu Trinity of supreme divinity.

¹² *Vishnu / Narayan*: One of the Gods of the Hindu Trinity of supreme divinity, is worshipped as the preserver and nurturer of creation.

¹³ *Brahmins*: Here refers to priests.

¹⁴ *Chowki*: A low wooden seat or stool.

¹⁵ *Matrikas*: There exists a total of sixteen incarnations of motherhood, referred to as the *Matrika*. These include *Gauri, Padma, Shachi, Medha, Savitri, Vijaya, Jaya, Devsena, Swadha, Swaha, Matar, Lok Matar, Dhriti, Pushti, Tushti, Atma Kuldevta*.

¹⁶ *Kausalya*: Eldest Queen of King Dashrath of Ajodhya, mother of Lord Rama.

¹⁷ *Sumitra*: Youngest Queen of King Dashrath, mother of Lakshmana and Shatrughana.

¹⁸ *Akshat*: Rice grains used with vermilion during ritual ceremonies.

¹⁹ *Surya Darshan*: Auspicious sighting of the sun.

²⁰ *Bhumi Sparsh*: Devotedly touching the earth in an act of reverence.

²¹ *Surya argh*: Offerings made to the sun, usually with water, in a copper kalash.

²² *Argh*: Vessel made of metal such as copper or gold, used to present offerings to the Gods.

Acknowledgement

Shruti Pant Banerjee is a recipient of the Indian Council of Social Science Research Doctoral Fellowship. This article is largely an outcome of her doctoral work sponsored by ICSSR. However, the authors are responsible for the facts stated, opinions expressed, and conclusions drawn.

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