

Tribal Wisdom and Sustainable Living in Kinnaura Folklore

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Abstract: India, with its many states and diverse indigenous communities, is a land of vibrant cultural heritage shaped by countless tribal traditions and folklore. Folklore encapsulates the collective wisdom, values, and beliefs of a community, often offering guidance on how to live in balance with nature. Oral traditions such as folk songs and stories have historically served as vital tools for passing down ecological knowledge and sustainable practices across generations. These narratives not only reflect a deep reverence for the natural world but also provide practical insights into how traditional societies have coexisted harmoniously with their environment. In contrast, the rapid advancement of science and technology in the 21st century, while contributing to human progress, has also led to a growing disconnection from nature. This disconnection has been accompanied by increasing environmental degradation and natural disasters—including the COVID-19 pandemic, earthquakes, desertification, and water scarcity. As modern lifestyles move further from ecological awareness, the lessons embedded in folklore become increasingly relevant and urgent.

This study focuses on the Kinnaura tribe of Himachal Pradesh and explores their rich oral traditions, encompassing folk songs, stories, and rituals, as vital expressions of cultural and ecological wisdom. Through an analysis of these traditional stories, the study demonstrates how Kinnauri folklore encourages sustainable lifestyles, ecological literacy, and environmental ethics. The study further emphasizes the need to preserve and integrate such indigenous oral traditions into contemporary ecological discourses, recognizing their potential to inspire environmentally responsible attitudes and practices in the modern world. It will also address the intricate relationship between folklore and cultural ecology, emphasizing the essential role that traditional narratives play in fostering ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Kinnaura Tribe, Indigenous Knowledge, Folklore, Oral Traditions, Ecological Literacy, Indian Tribal culture

Introduction.

The essential criteria distinguishing tribal societies from others are rooted in the distinctiveness of their culture, which grants them tribal status. This uniqueness arises from their isolated existence within hills and forests. A key characteristic identifying a group as a tribe is their close association with nature. This cultural connection contributes significantly to managing their habitat and fostering a harmonious relationship with nature through their belief systems². It is well known that living close to nature promotes a more sustainable lifestyle, giving rise to a knowledge system known as folk knowledge. This encompasses knowledge related to forest produce collection, hunting, animal husbandry, agriculture, crafts, and the medicinal use of flora and fauna. This paper highlights how tribes utilize their traditional and cultural knowledge to manage and conserve natural resources. Contemporary

environmental philosophers advocate acknowledging the "ecological wisdom" present within diverse cultural traditions. Aldo Leopold's influential work, "A Sand County Almanac," notably includes the pivotal essay "The Land Ethic," where Leopold emphasizes the importance of fostering a deeper companionship with nature⁴.

The Kinnaur district, nestled in the northeastern part of Himachal Pradesh, India is home to the Kinnaura tribe, also known as Kanawara or Kanawaras. Historically referred to as the land of gods, Kinnaur was inhabited by beings known as Kinners, who blended human and divine traits⁵. Despite limited historical records due to a lack of a writing tradition, Kinnaur's rugged landscape kept it isolated for centuries, fostering unique religio-cultural and socio-economic traditions. This isolation also led to the emergence of distinct regional dialects, reflecting varied linguistic and cultural practices across three main cultural divisions: Upper Kinnaur, where Bhoti Kinnauri is predominantly spoken by Buddhist communities along the Tibetan border; Middle Kinnaur; and Lower Kinnaur, where the majority are Hindu speakers of the Khoshiaskad or Hamskad dialect, also known as Lower Kinnauri or Popular Kinnauri. While specific speaker counts are unavailable, Lower Kinnauri speakers are the most prevalent throughout the region. Covering an area of 6,401 square kilometers with a population of 84,298 as of the 2011 census, Kinnaur boasts a unique sociolinguistic landscape, shedding light on language vitality issues such as language use and attitudes. The culture and rituals observed in the Kinnaur district stand out as distinct and unique compared to other regions of Himachal Pradesh. Notably, their customs surrounding marriage and their heavy reliance on agriculture for sustenance differ significantly from those found elsewhere. Additionally, their religious beliefs and practices are unique⁶.

Kinnaur itself isn't a specific location to visit; rather, it encompasses the Kinner Kailash region. Within Himachal Pradesh, Kinnaur serves as an administrative block, comprising three main areas: Pooh, Kalpa, and Nichar. The district consists of six tehsils: Nichar, Kalpa, Pooh, Sangla, Moorang, and Hangrang, with its headquarters located in Reckong-Peo. According to the 2011 census, Kinnaur is the second least populous district in Himachal Pradesh, following Lahaul and Spiti⁷.

The district is characterized by linguistic diversity, with nine vital languages spoken among its inhabitants. Although historical records of Kinnaur are scarce, legends and myths abound among its people. Some claim descent from the Kinners of the Mahabharata, while others trace their lineage to the Kirats, who retreated to the remote trans-Himalayan region after being subdued by the Aryans and Khasas. Historically, Kinnaur was once part of the Mughal Kingdom's domain and later fell under the influence of the Maurya Empire around the 6th century BCE. Between the 9th and 12th centuries, it was governed by the Guge Kingdom of Tibet. After the decline of the Mughal Empire, Kinnaur Valley, known then as Chini Tehsil, played a crucial role until its absorption into the Mahasu district. Various factors, including political, ethnic, and cultural considerations, prompted its restructuring into the present-day Kinnaur district in 1960⁸.

Folk knowledge encompasses the understanding developed within a community, embedded in their lifestyle, and fostering a harmonious relationship with nature. This knowledge, accumulated over generations, has been integrated into local culture over centuries⁹.

This paper aims to explore how the Kinnaura tribe preserves nature through their cultural traditions, focusing on two primary aspects: religious practices and folk culture. The study will provide valuable insights into how the tribal community utilizes natural resources

sustainably¹⁰.

The essence of this study lies in understanding the sustainable practices employed by the Kinnaura people to maintain ecological balance and harmony with their environment. By examining their religious ceremonies and the rich tapestry of folklore that shapes their worldview, we aim to uncover the intricate ways they intertwine reverence for nature with their daily lives. Through this in-depth examination, we seek to highlight the profound connection between Kinnaur's cultural heritage and its commitment to environmental preservation¹¹.

Research Methodology :

This research aimed to explore the comprehensive belief systems and environmental practices of the Kinnaura tribes, encompassing ecological wisdom, social dynamics, cultural elements, religious aspects, tribal philosophies, ancestral knowledge, folklore, economic patterns, faith-based practices, entertainment norms, as well as rituals and festivals¹². The primary focus was on gathering firsthand data through intensive methods, particularly utilizing focused group discussions to delve into philosophical beliefs and individual perspectives. Additionally, individual study methods were employed to enrich sociological and cultural understanding. This study utilizes both primary and secondary data sources. Qualitative information was gathered through various field techniques including interview schedules, observation methods, focus group discussions, and informal dialogues. Key individuals were chosen from the village to guarantee a comprehensive grasp of its sociocultural makeup. Elders from the hamlet, women who practiced folklore, farmers, local priest, educators, and young people were among them. Women offered insights into oral traditions and customs, farmers described sustainable techniques, and elders imparted historical and ritual knowledge. Religious views were discussed by priests, perspectives on shifting cultural dynamics were provided by educators and young people.

These informants were chosen to represent diverse segments of the village population in terms of social and economic backgrounds. Secondary data pertaining to the village was primarily derived from village surveys conducted in Ribba, Jangi, and Kamru villages. Because of their accessibility, ecological diversity, and cultural richness, the villages of Ribba, Jangi, and Kamru were chosen. Ribba is renowned for its exceptional grape wine (Angoori), sustainable agriculture, and folk melodies. In addition to being the primary producer of pine nuts, a rare crop worldwide, Jangi is famous for its revered deodar woods. With its ancient fort, temple complex, and spiritual legacy, Kamru is a place of great cultural importance. Additionally, district gazetteers, published books, and unpublished reports were consulted to construct a comprehensive understanding of the religious aspects within Kinnaura society¹³.

Worship of “NAGAS”: The idea of God and Nature:

The Kinnaura tribe holds a strong belief in the superiority of nature and God. Because of their accessibility, ecological diversity, and cultural richness, the villages of Ribba, Jangi, and Kamru were selected. Folk melodies, agriculture, and premium grape wine (Angoori) are the main draws of Ribba. In addition to being the leading producer of pine nuts, a rare product worldwide, Jangi is renowned for its intact deodar forests. With its spiritual legacy and medieval fort, Kamru has great cultural significance. These communities provide a range of ecological and social situations, which makes them perfect for comparative research.

This conviction arises from their observation that humans have not attained

divine status, and they continue to suffer from diseases, which they interpret as a form of punishment. They attribute the escalating prevalence of diseases to human activities, notably the pollution of rivers caused by Humans and industries. They also hold humans accountable for the degradation of nature, evident in deforestation and dwindling rainfall, which they see as consequences of human actions¹⁴.

In the eyes of these tribes, trees, water, animals, and birds hold sacred status akin to deities in their religion. They advocate for the preservation and protection of these natural elements, believing that restoring their abundance will bring back the prosperity and wisdom of earlier times. Their perspective is encapsulated in the notion that "Nature and God are one and the same.

The worship of Nagas, or serpent deities, is a deeply rooted tradition in India, tracing back to ancient times. Himachal Pradesh, in particular, has a rich history of Naga worship, which dates back to the early Christian era. The inhabitants of this region hold a profound reverence for snakes, and serpent temples are a common sight in nearly every village across the state.

Nages and Narenas cult is also quite common in Great Himalayan Region and most of the Nages and Narenas deities are known to be originated and associated with their respective lakes called Sorang. It is believed that in these lakes the whole family of Nages and Narenas deity live and these lakes are visited in due time by the respective deities. The Narenas deity is known for blessing prosperity and destroying ill spirits. Nages deity is most popular as rain god though they have same powers like Narenas deity. The practice during scarcity of rain in which womenfolk take their dried and burnt out field crops to the Kali- Nages temple is quite prevalent in the village Bari for invoking rain water. Similar practices are prevalent in other Nages temples in Kinnaur.

In the Kinnaur tribe of Himachal Pradesh, two primary beliefs underpin the practice of snake worship. First, the agrarian communities view snakes as integral to their daily lives. They believe that by worshipping these creatures, they can protect themselves from the deadly threat of snake venom. This aspect of the worship ensures the community's safety from snake bites, which could otherwise be fatal¹⁵.

Secondly, appeasing the Nagas is thought to bring prosperity and ensure the safety and well-being of future generations. By venerating snakes as semi-divine beings or ancestral figures, people satisfy both their religious obligations and ritualistic desires. This tradition has persisted from prehistoric times to the present day. According to ancestral stories, the areas around these springs are believed to be the dwelling places of the Naag Devta. As such, these areas must remain clean and unpolluted. It is strictly forbidden to throw any kind of waste or dirty materials near the spring water, as it is thought to desecrate the holy site.

Water sources are not the only source of this link. Since they are the homes of local deities, sacred groves or forests (dev van) are protected in many villages. It is forbidden to cut down trees, hunt animals, or even talk loudly there. Religious reverence prevents development or deforestation in certain locations, so establishing biodiversity hotspots and conservation zones

protected by custom.

In a similar vein, only specific flowers may be harvested during celebrations such as Phulaich, and only after ritualistic care and reverence for the mountains. By controlling resource consumption, these traditions foster a sustainable relationship with the natural world. Thanking the land and rain deities is part of agricultural rituals, and ecological knowledge and spiritual timing inform techniques like seasonal grazing and rotational farming.

Ecological wisdom and cultural customs are closely intertwined in Kinnaur. Communities

establish holy boundaries that safeguard the environment by elevating natural elements such as water, woods, land, and vegetation. This demonstrates how traditional religious systems serve as unofficial environmental regulations, protecting the environment not just out of necessity but also out of a profound sense of shared responsibility and respect.

If there is ever a need to alter the course of the spring water, a ritual must be performed to pay respect and ask for permissions. In the Kinnauri dialect, "Naagas" refers to the Snake Deity, and "Tee" means water so this spring water is called as "NAAGAS TEE". This ritual requires the entire community to come together to perform a pooja (ceremonial worship) and make any changes in a traditional and respectful manner. This practice underscores the community's deep respect for water resources, which are believed to be gifts from the Naag Devta.

The belief in the sanctity of spring water and the rituals surrounding it are deeply ingrained in the Kinnaura tribe's culture. They believe that any violation of these traditions, such as polluting the spring or diverting its water without proper rituals, will result in divine retribution. Such transgressions are thought to bring about health issues or other misfortunes as punishment from the deities.

These practices and beliefs are not just remnants of the past; they continue to be upheld by the current generation. The persistence of these traditions highlights the enduring cultural and spiritual significance of Naga worship in the Kinnaura tribe, reflecting a harmonious relationship between the community and their natural environment.

Naga worship in the Himalayas reflects a blend of practical concerns for safety, agricultural prosperity, and deep-rooted spiritual beliefs. The tradition continues to thrive, adapting to the cultural and religious landscape of the region while maintaining its ancient significance.

Folkloric Festivals and Cultural Practices:

Wissler (1926) and Kroeber (1939) explained the interrelationship between man, culture, and ecology, which Steward expanded upon with his concept of cultural ecology (1955), emphasizing the interrelationship between human culture and the ecosystem. This ecological approach is invaluable for understanding how ecology influences culture and the intimate relationship between culture and specific ecosystems (Sarkar and Dasgupta 2000). In anthropology, the cultural ecology approach elucidates the interaction between humans and nature, illustrating the exchange between ecological conditions, religious practices, and human life. Nature profoundly influences human existence, and worship of nature is integral to tribal religion. This belief in the supernatural power of nature manifests as a form of religion that helps maintain a harmonious relationship between nature and tribal life. According to Kukreti (2020), "Tribal religious belief is an ecological expression of their existence that maintains an intimate relationship with nature."

The Kinnaura tribe of Himachal Pradesh exemplifies this relationship through various religious practices that respect and honor nature and the environment. In Kinnaur, singing and dancing are essential aspects of merrymaking, with more than 100 festivals celebrated throughout the year. These festivals, which are inseparable from singing and dancing, often use flowers abundantly. Among the most widely celebrated is Ukhya.

One notable festival is Fulaich, the Festival of Flowers, which is unique to Kinnaur. Celebrated over three months from August to October, it serves as a farewell to the season of flowers. Each village in Kinnaur has its own deity and specific traditions for celebrating this festival, reflecting the people's deep love for their centuries-old customs. Gathering flowers from the hilltops, a task that signifies the villagers' dedication to their traditions, involves

significant effort. Traditionally, at least one person from each household participates in this ritual, taking along symbols of the village deity, eatables, and country liquor (phasar). Women and elders see off the gatherers with songs of Fulaich. The gatherers, respecting the goddess Kali's forest abode, cease making noise beyond a certain point, make offerings including liquor to the goddess, and then begin plucking flowers. The first flower is offered to the goddess as a token of respect. After spending the night in caves (Udarbo), the gatherers return to the village without looking back to avoid offending the goddess.

The flowers are then used to decorate caps, make garlands, and bouquets. The villagers assemble near the Santhang, or temple courtyard, where they bow to the deity, sing songs of Fulaich, and dance. This courtyard is a vital social, religious, and recreational gathering place where disputes are settled. Men and women of the village, adorned in their finest, participate in the dance. On the third day, dancing continues in the temple courtyard, concluding the festival.

According to legend, Indra, the King of Gods, escaped a battle with demons by hiding behind flowers, leading the people of Kinnaur to hold flowers in great reverence as protectors from evil. The festival also marks the end of the mourning period for families who lost a loved one in the previous year. Like Ukhyang, other festivals in the Kinnaura tribe, such as the Beech Festival and Losar in upper Kinnaur, celebrate and preserve nature through culture and tradition. These festivals demonstrate their strong ties to the natural world and communal life. The Beesh Festival, which takes place following the harvest, honours the land's abundance with songs, dances, and offerings to local deities. House cleaning, monastery prayers, and masked dances (Chham) are all part of Losar's celebration of the Tibetan New Year in Upper Kinnaur, which honours the natural forces and welcomes prosperity. Sustainable ideals and communal harmony are reinforced by these festivals, which combine ecological care with cultural celebration.

In conclusion, the rich tapestry of festivals in the Kinnaura tribe, Celebration of both humans and nature in symphony. Ancient wisdom promoting peaceful and sustainable co-existence deeply rooted in the worship and preservation of nature, exemplifies the enduring and intimate relationship between human culture and the ecosystem. These traditions highlight the profound influence of nature on tribal life and underscore the tribe's

Folk Songs: A Cultural and Natural Symphon

The local idiom "Kanarangoo Khakhango Geethang," which approximately translates to "Kinnauri people are always singing in the mountains," brilliantly captures the Kinnauri people's passion of music and dancing, which is firmly ingrained in their daily lives as was previously noted. The people of Kinnaur are nearly always accompanied by song, whether they are enjoying a festival, working in the fields, or strolling in groups. Music is a way of life, a language of connection and feeling, and it transcends performance. These folk tunes, known as Geetang in the local dialect, encompass all facets of communal life and convey feelings of happiness, sorrow, love, longing, and respect for the natural world.

Folk songs in Kinnaur's isolated mountainous regions are more than just amusement; they are living manifestations of the locals' profound ecological awareness. These songs, which have been passed down through the generations, show the area's material and spiritual reliance on nature while also preserving its cultural identity. Kinnauri folk melodies continue to be an enduring monument to a way of life where culture and environment are interwoven in a world that is becoming more and more cut off from nature.

These songs are sung at weddings, spiritual meetings, spring festivals, planting and harvesting, and other times of year. They frequently take inspiration straight from the natural world. The song's lyrics honor the splendor of the meadows, the lucidity of mountain sunrises, the glimmer of snowfields, and the course of rivers creating an image of a society that values and reveres nature. Chaita ushers in the spring, while songs like Malhar are chanted to welcome rain during of cultural calendar, enhancing the community's ties to seasonal rhythms.

Crucially, folk songs also contain ecological principles ingrained in them. They use metaphor, praise, and narrative to instil respect for the earth, water, trees, and animals instead of giving direct instructions. For example, a song could personify natural elements to convey care and regard, such as a river as a weeping mother or a deodar tree as a witness to ancestral marriages. By encouraging a moral code for the environment, this poetic framework makes sure that ecological responsibility is presenting a picture of a culture that respects and honours nature.

"Waali share Loliha haye Sangla deshang, aand ta zunding des fayul hyes Angla deshang"

is a wonderful traditional Kinnauri folk song that pays lyrical homage to the stunning beauty of Sangla village in Kinnaur. The song expresses not only admiration but also a strong emotional and spiritual bond with the area as it extols its breathtaking scenery, snow-capped mountains, gurgling rivers, and verdant valleys. These songs represent cultural affirmations of respect for the environment, not just literary sentiments. The Kinnaur people instil ecological awareness in their collective memory by celebrating and preserving their environment through these verses. Folk music is a potent tool for maintaining both cultural identity and ecological balance because it teaches people to be grateful, respectful, and to live in harmony with nature by praising their surroundings in song. These musical traditions act as a sort of cultural calendar, strengthening the community's ties to seasonal rhythms by recording time using ecological cycles.

Importantly, ecological concepts are also embedded in folk music. Rather than providing explicit directions, they develop respect for the land, water, trees, and animals through metaphor, praise, and storytelling. A song could personify natural objects, like a river as a sobbing mother or a deodar tree as a witness to ancestral marriages, to express love and respect.

These songs' ongoing relevance shows how resilient ancient ecological knowledge systems are, even in the face of contemporary pressures like migration, tourism, and consumerism. They stay rooted while adapting. Because they firmly ground the community in place-based knowledge, an emotional bond with the land, and a feeling of collective ecological stewardship, Kinnauri folk songs are more than just cultural treasures; they are also tools for sustainability.

Conclusion

Tribal life exemplifies sustainability due to its intrinsic closeness to nature, which, in turn, ensures the continuity and sustainability of natural ecosystems. The tribal philosophy of environmental management arises from their deep and evolving knowledge, which serves to protect natural resources, maintain a balance between nature and human life, and preserve the

ecology of their habitats. This philosophy significantly contributes to sustainable development by fostering a harmonious relationship with nature.

In Kinnaur, this devotion to nature is evident in their festivals, cultural traditions, and even in their marriages, all of which are deeply intertwined with the natural environment, demonstrating a deep spiritual bond with the natural world. Villagers gather wildflowers from elevated meadows to present to regional deities at the Phulaich festival, signifying their appreciation for the natural world. Offerings are presented to mountain and forest deities for benefits during marriage ceremonies, and traditional clothing frequently has themes inspired by the natural world. People hold sacred trees, rivers, and groves in high regard, and damaging them is interpreted as beckoning bad luck. These customs demonstrate how Kinnauri cultural and spiritual life actively incorporates nature in addition to respecting it. The people of Kinnaur live lives that are guided by local deities, with an unwavering faith in their practices and traditions. This reverence for nature is reflected in every aspect of their daily life.

The people of Kinnaur maintain this age-old respect for nature and their natural surroundings, reflecting a profound and enduring commitment to environmental stewardship. This respect for nature extends beyond festivals to everyday life. The local diet is composed of naturally available resources, and agricultural practices are designed to be sustainable and in harmony with the environment. The climate, topography, and traditional knowledge of Kinnaur have shaped the region's naturally sustainable agriculture practices. Soil erosion is avoided by terrace farming, and soil fertility is maintained chemical-free through crop rotation and the application of organic manure. To ensure equitable and effective use of glacial water, water is regulated using traditional kuhls (irrigation channels). Buckwheat, barley, and apples are among the climate-resilient crops that farmers cultivate to adapt to the local climate. A zero-waste system is created by integrating livestock into farming. In addition to being backed by cultural beliefs and customs that encourage harmony with the environment, these acts demonstrate a profound respect for nature. Traditional knowledge and practices are passed down through generations, ensuring that each new generation maintains the balance between human life and nature.

Marriages and other social ceremonies also incorporate elements that honour nature, further embedding ecological consciousness in the cultural fabric. By living in accordance with these traditions, the people of Kinnaur not only protect their natural environment but also ensure that their cultural practices remain sustainable and resilient. The sustainability of tribal life in Kinnaur is deeply rooted in their closeness to nature and their profound respect for the environment. Their festivals, traditions, and daily practices all reflect a harmonious relationship with nature, which ensures the preservation of their ecological surroundings. This way of life, guided by local deities and traditional wisdom, underscores the significant contribution of tribal communities to sustainable development and environmental stewardship.

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