

DAARMA: THE PEOPLE, THEIR LOCATION AND RITUALS

Dharachula tehsil of Pithauragarh in Uttarakhand provides the entrance into the Shauka(Bhotia) region. The river Kali and its tributaries running through this region mark the boundaries between India and Nepal. On one side it borders Nepal while on the other it borders China. The folk lores prevalent in the region describe the region to have provided refuge to the Pandavas when they renounced everything after the epic war of Mahabharata.

The region comprises of three valleys: towards east to the North of the Kali river is the Vyansh Valley, believed to have been the abode of the Sage Vyas, and its lower strip is called the Chaudansh Valley. The northern part of the tributary of the western course of the river Kalik, Dhauri is called Malla Darma and its southern part is the Talla Darma. The inhabitants of the region are called as Byansi,, Chaudanshi and Darmani or Darma. During the the peak winter(between November and February), the inhabitants of Byans and Darma region come down to their winter abodes at Dharachula and neighbouring areas while the Chaudanshi people do not leave their regions.

There are about 19 Villages in Darma, which includes 14 in Malla(north), 4 in Talla(south) and the lone uninhabited village of Vidang. As Malla Daarma happens to be a quite elevated region it remains out of reach during winters forcing people to seek refuge in lower plains, extending from Dharachula to Baluakot during winter. The original locations of the Darma people and their winter locations are as follows:

Original Village

Winter Location

1. Siipu	Siipu Galatigaad
2. Maarchha	Maarchha Galatigaad
3. Tidaang	Kaalika
4. Goo	Baluakot
5. Filum	Chhaarchham
6. Dhaakar	Ghaatibagad
7. Baun	Chhaarchham, Gothi
8. Dugtu	Nigalpaani
9. Baaling	Galaati
10. Saun	Nigalpaani
11. Naagling	Nigalpaani, Galaati
12. Chal	Dobaal
13. Sela	ansiigada

Daar village and Dharachula which are 13 Kms apart, were connected by roads. But since the landslide on June 16, 2013, the roadway has become unnavigable. Now at present the most that one can do is reach Soabla by car and undertake the rest of the journey on foot.

Historical account:

Shaukas are said to trace their descent from the aboriginal tribes of Yaksha, Kinnara, Naga and Kirata respectively, of which the Kiratas are said to be earliest inhabitants. The Rajis, the inhabitants of this regions claim their descent from the Kiratas, and similarities exists in the vocabularies used by these two groups of people. The Kinnaras are the Mangoloid people found along the Himalayas, chiefly in the Mount Kailasa who are known to be adept in dance and music. Some Historians had even linked them to the Khasi tribes, who according to Atkinson were known as Yakshas during the reign of Ashoka the great. Khasis may have got mixed with the Shaukas as evidenced by the fact that one of the ravines in Kuti village is known as Kharsakot. Besides Kirata, Kinnara, Khasi and Aryans, Shaukas may also have got mixed with the Naga race, for the Nagalinga Village and their inhabitants the Naganyals trace their links to the Naga race. Further these people had been in contact with the Shakas, Hunas and Tibetans giving rise to a composite tribe known by the name Shauka. Hence on the one hand, while the Vedic practices of the Aryans have exerted their influence on these people, on the other hand, the customs and practices of the Shaka, Greeks and Hunas have also influenced them in no small measure.

Religious beliefs:

As the Shaukas lead their lives enduring naturally adverse conditions, they are constantly overawed and overwhelmed by the might of natural forces and artefacts such as the flora and fauna, rocks, rivers, rivulets and nature. They believe in soul(Siyami) which comes in many types such as Bhut(Devil), Pret(ghost), Chudail(Vampire) and Dev (Angel) which though formless have capabilities of human like work and beyond. They believe that the soul shifts into a different body on death. The souls of the ancestors are believed to reside in each and every part of the nature. Sacrifice is one of the chief practices of these people. They are non-vegetarians and so are their gods. The Gods are offered sacrifices of Goats along with rice grains, fragrant dhuups and Chakti(local liquor). On all occasions, irrespective whether they are auspicious or otherwise, Chakti is unavoidable. A rock symbolizing the Linga of Shiva is seen at every temple. Every village has its own deity and so also does every household. The major Gods worshipped by these people include Gabla Dev, Svyangsai, and Chiplakedar respectively.

Wedding Rituals:

Wedding is one of the most important festivities among the Shaukas. Until some time ago, a marriage by elopement with the girl was a practice among these people. The practice involved the boy being helped by his friends and also the girl's villagers to elope with the girl. Love marriages are also prevalent in this community where the boy and girl start their life together

without the consent of their parents. They are later on accepted by their parents. This practice is known as Chalvu Diimo. Among the Shaukas, wedding proposals are initiated by the groom's people through an intermediary called the taram. Taram could be a close relative of the girl or her friend. She informs the girl's people about the status of the groom's family and also his character. The grooms may also send some money to the girl for her to buy a ring. If the girl accepts it, the boy sends his family and friends to the girl's house to fix the marriage. This is known as Thomo. Otherwise the money is returned. During Thomo the elders of the village assemble at the girl's place and a bottle of Chakti, white clothes and sweets are offered by the boy's group to make the proposal. If the girl's family is in favour of the proposal, the offered Chakti and sweets are offered to the departed souls and gods and goddesses and then distributed among everyone present. Marriage date is usually decided by the girl's group. On the wedding day, the boy comes in a procession accompanied by his relatives and villagers. The procession is led by a harijans with song and dance. On reaching the girl's house, the grooms group is greeted by showering flowers and aromatic scents. The rituals are solemnized at the bride's residence within the course of a day or two. During this rituals the people from both groups engage in singing and dancing and meat and liquor are the chief delicacies partaken. Further the villagers invite the groom's party to their houses and entreat them well. These days even the services of a Brahmin is requisitioned to solemnize a wedding among these people, but it is done only if acceptable to the girl's group. On return to groom's place, all the near and dear ones in the village assemble. Initially Dhalam(cake) pooja is performed by the elders during which the white clothes are placed on the bride's head and a coin put into the bride's cup is offered to her along with Dhalam. For a couple of days that follows there is a lot of fun and frolic at the groom's place where meat and liquor are the main food items.

Birth Ceremony:

On the birth of a child, invitations are sent to all the villagers and close relatives. Dhalam (a cake of sattu) is worshipped. Further respects are paid to the departed souls and gods and goddesses by offering rice grains, dhalam and chakthi to seek long and healthy life for the new arrival. The child and its mother are kept away from the main house for 11 days because they are thought to be inauspicious at that time. On the 11th day, the child and the mother are given bath and purified by sprinkling Gomutra(a cow's urine) on them. The whole house is then similarly sanctified by sprinkling cow dung and Gomutra in it. Pooja is also performed with Dhalam and Chakti. Thereafter the mother and child are allowed into the house. Guests are also invited to witness this event.

Bhumo:

This is a ceremony to be performed for a child who completes three months. As long as the child cannot walk or stand on his own he is supposed to be tied to the back with a shawl or chadar. This ceremony sanctifies this practice. The child is given a bath and made to wear a new set of white clothes. Then a boy or an elderly person whose younger brother or sister is alive and who

can carry a child is made to carry the child on his back nine times across the main door of the house. This symbolizes the aspiration for a long life for the child involving frequent comings in and out of the house. This ritual also includes worshipping of Dhalam and treating of the villagers to a feast. The naming ceremony for the child is also performed on this day.

Mundan(Punyaswiimo)

This ritual is usually performed on the third, fifth and seventh year of the child. All the relatives and villagers are invited to this ritual. Worshipping of the Gods with Dhalam and Chakti is performed as usual. This ritual is performed on the critical day of Shukla Paksha but Mundan(head tonsure) is not performed on this day. Hair is cut with scissors and the cut hair tied in a dhaja(cloth) is taken to Mansarovar. Since the 1962 Indo China war, Kailash became inaccessible. So presently people take the cut hair to other holy places like Haridwar, Rishikesh and Kedarnath or else place on an elevated height at one's own house.

Death ceremony:

Death ceremony is known as Gwan or Duding among the Daarmas. If the death occurs between July and October, the body is kept in a pit outside the Village wherein condiments and salt are added for preserving the body. When the fields are cleared in October, the body is removed from the pit and cremated. The funeral pyre is made from stones. Each villager carries a wooden log which is then placed on the pyre. Before being taken in the coffin the body is given a bath. And the villagers are not supposed to undertake any other work on that day. The relatives of the deceased person lend their shoulders for carrying the body and before them the sisters and daughters of the dead person lead the way carrying a white cloth on their heads. The fire to light the funeral pyre is carried from the house. The door of the funeral pyre is held towards the east. Food and other items dear to the dead person including weapons are placed near the pyre. The body is placed on the pyre with the head towards the east and the legs towards the west. A piece of gold or silver (akcha) is placed at the mouth of the body for purifying it. After the body is burnt all the people from the cremation come to departed soul's house and purifying themselves with Dhoop and agarbathis. On the third day after cremation, the mortal remains of the dead are collected and they are placed at a high pedestal in the house and the women folks among close relatives place a piece of jewellery on it to mark their respect. That place is decorated with flowers and dhoop is placed there. Everyday the family members of the dead person place the food before it before having food. This ritual is followed until the end of the ritual observance. Often good food items are brought and offered to the dead person before the family members have it. The raised pedestal with the mortal remains is known as Yang and the food offered to it is called Yangru Tamu. At the end of the ritual observance period, a goat is brought from Tibet. If the dead person is a male, the goat will be a he-goat and if, a lady, the goat to be brought is a she-goat. This goat is looked at as a personification of the dead person and is called as Yak Byambla. It is fed the same way as the departed person would have liked. If the dead person were fond of alcohol, the Yak Byambla would also be given alcohol. Yak Byambla is assumed

to have the soul of the departed person. When the ritual is fixed, everyone in the village invites it to their houses and feed it. . Before it is taken to the village it is given a bath and its legs are cleaned by wiping. Every household in the village feeds it as a mark of honour for the departed soul. Then it is taken with pomp and gaiety and left outside the village. Then in memory of the dead the family of the dead person make a sacrifice of 3 to 5 goats depending on their relative status and feed the villagers. Earlier the practice used to be to contribute a goat each by each of the son-in-laws of the dead person. Later at night accumulated wood is set on fire. Every family contributes a measure of wood which is known as Yakeshing Gumu. These wood are used for activities ranging from camp fire to cooking food for three days. At nights, the ladies barring those belonging to the family of the dead and their close relatives form a circle around the camp fire and dance which is called as dharthimo. The musical instrument used for this ritual is a large Dhol but it is its inside which is beaten during dharthimo. During auspicious occasions this way of beating the Dhol and dharthimo are not considered appropriate. Everybody holds a sword in one hand and a Dhal in the other. During this ceremony, close relatives and family members of the Dead keep their heads open and rang coat is placed inside out over the head while the female members wear Chungbala inside out. During auspicious occasions, wearing of clothes inside out is considered inauspicious. Further everyone spills a little portion of the food and chakti they take onto the ground as an offering for the dead.

Thereafter Amricha(Guide) is called upon who is trained in his art and narrates Kaga purana. Amricha addresses the departed soul and guides him through on the way to Kailasa. They are told to take the advice of Chanwar cow to cross the Vaitarni. They encounter several hindrances on the way but they are guided to circumvent through all of them. Ultimately the soul reaches Kailasa despite all odds.