

The Manuscripts from our Cow-cellars: Traditions of Purjo, Pataro, Pustnamo, and Bayi in Kumaon Region



Jeetesh Kumar Joshi

Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi

Email: jjjoul22@gmail.com

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HISTORICAL INSIGHT AND RESEARCH

E-ISSN: 2454-5600

Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

URL: <http://ijhir.qtanalytics.in>

ABSTRACT

This paper tries to explore the record-keeping traditions from the Kumaon region, in the central Himalaya. The types of different records which are available from this region have been discussed in this paper and there is also an attempt to look upon the communities engaged in the maintenance and generation of these records. How these writing traditions were important for the state-society and ruling elites, is also analysed in a brief way.

KEY WORDS

Kumaun, Bahi, Bayi, Vanshaawali, Chand Dynasty

made paper on which Kumauni Khari Holi songs were written, called *Holi ko Pataro*. Moreover, there was a document titled *Lakshmidutt Joshi Ko Gharo Ko Kharch*, dated *śaké 1808, bhadra sudi, 15, chandra*, also a *purjo*. From the same village, later on, from an abandoned and dilapidated house, *pustnamo/vamśavali* of that village and books related to the Brahmanic rituals also came into light. These documents were impressive and compelled me to reminisce about a tradition whose remnants were exposed to our eyes at that time.

This paper discusses in brief, basically, three kinds of documents. These documents can be categorized as *bayi/davthar*, *vamśavali/pustnamo* and *chitti/purjo*

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, after the completion of my grandfather's first annual death anniversary rituals, we were clearing up the junks kept in boxes in the cow cellar of our house.¹ We discovered some documents and geometrical instruments used for making astrological charts, among other things. They were in very bad condition. There were some long hand-made paper sheets, magic-mantras written on them, and these are called *purjo*, some annual astrological charts belonging to the mid-nineteenth century, called *Patrao* or *Panchang*, a two-meter long hand-

Although these documents are not related to medieval times, but they indicate a tradition of writing prevalent in this region at the local village level, at least in some pockets. Dr. Ram Singh in his works on Kali-Kumon² (District Champawat) and Sor (District Pithoragarh) had collected some of these documents³ and Dr. Prayag Joshi unveiled the revenue bayis (*bahī*) of the Chand Dynasty from Seera (District Pithoragarh).⁴ Both these discoveries and indefatigable efforts of these lifetime scholars are fundamental and crucial to understand the history of this region and pre-colonial literary traditions.

In the Himalayan region, there were different types of traditions engaged in the practice of writing, creating, and generating documents. From the time immemorial, we find written records on cave walls, walls of temples, copper and gold plates, *bhojpatra* (birch-bark), *tād-patra* (palm-leaves), rocks and hero-stones from this region. Here, in this research paper, the objective is to indicate and emphasize on some of the documenting processes prevalent in the central Himalayan region and specifically in the region between Kali-Ganga in the east and Sarayu on the west. However, these traditions were not confined to the area between these rivers, as there are many pieces of evidence from both sides of the rivers that indicate the same traditional systems were prevalent in other parts of central Himalaya. This region is being kept on focus only because of the area-specific limitations of the ongoing research with which this paper is concerned.

In medieval times, this region came under the political authority of the Chanda dynasty ruling from the city of Alampur/ Almora. Before the establishment of the political suzerainty of the Chand Dynasty, there were different chiefdoms ruling from different locations within this region. This region was divided into subregions; Seera, Sor, Askot and Gangoli. Seera and Sor were under and related to the political authority of the Raika dynasty of the Doti kingdom. Doti is situated on the other side of Kali-Ganga, the present Sudur-Pashchim Prant of Nepal. This region is also known as the Karnali region because of the Karnali river basin. So we can assume the trans- river basin connection existing in this Himalayan region. These connections were not only limited to the political authority but also to the migrations occurring in both directions. These connections, however, are still not well researched.

In this research paper, the attention is paid towards the specific traditions prevalent in the region related to the record-keeping and

generating; however, the available pieces of evidence either are few in numbers and in bad condition, just on the edge of being extinct or, they are still not searched for in some areas.

Bayi (bahi): Atkinson⁵ and pt. Badridutt Pande⁶, both, mentioned a popular legend from the Sor region about Jaida Kiral, a record (Bayi) keeper in the service of Bam rajas of Sor. It was mentioned that he was very strict in his maintenance of records, and it created chaos among the peasants. Oppressed and humiliated peasants conspired against Jaida, while he was out to suppress a rebellious chief. Soryal (people of Sor) told his wife that Jaida had been killed, so she should commit Sati with the Bayis maintained by Jaida, as he liked them the most. She did accordingly. In this way, they became successful in getting rid of these instruments of oppression. Other than telling the story of oppression and resistance, this legend indicates to a system of record-keeping, called Bayi. In 1985, Dr. Prayag Joshi found Bayis from two places in Seerakot/ Seera and published them in 1996. The first one was written on long hand-made paper sheets and has 12 pages. It belongs to 1760 CE. The second set of Bayis is from village *Gadyar* (Seera-Pithoragarh) and in this, all three bayis have been combined together with a thread. One of them is a copy of the first Bayi, and there are two other, one belongs to 1600 CE and the other to 1605 CE. These bayis had been filled with numerous other information in later years, at least up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. The records mention the names of Malla and Chand kings. Seera came under the influence of the Chand dynasty of Almora in the second half of the sixteenth century; before this, it was under the Mallas of Doti. However, some of the names in the lists of kings can not be corroborated with the other sources, but many of the names of the Chand Dynasty can be corroborated with the other sources. This list gives names of 57 kings of Kumaon, the first fifteen names are not related to the Chand family, but some of the names can be

traced in the *jagars* related to the katyuri Kings of Kumaon. It tells us the dialogical process between oral and written processes. In this list, the last name is of Raja Shivchand, after whom situations in Almora became very chaotic, and in 1791, Gorakhas took over.

The record which belongs to the year 1600 CE is the most lengthy, and it deals with various offerings and maintenance duties imposed on different families and villages for different purposes. In the beginning, it mentions the name of the king *Shri Rajadhiraj Mal, Ripumal, Harimaljyu and claims that it was copied from the earlier records*. The inhabitants of this region had to maintain and arrange for the supply of labor, grains, Ghee, oil and mules to the *Sirdar (Chief)* of *Sirakot*. It mentions different heads in which duties should be collected like *dastur, niyat, chakari* and *dand*. And most of the time, these duties were collected in kind.

Interestingly, the record mentions the arrangements for offerings at Papaneshwar temple, Sira, at Baleshwar temple, and at Bhairo ka Than at local place will be made by different families and villages on different pious occasions. Whereas the offerings for Baleshwar temple at Champawat included Ghee, rice, and food, the offerings for Papaneshwar were mainly *Lakho* (bucks) brought by certain families on certain occasions. The arrangement for offerings, in the form of *Boko* (wether), on the occasion of Dasain (Vijayadashmi) was done by *Sira ko Sirdar* himself.

This record also mentions, in detail, the arrangements needed to be done when the *Sirdar* is on visit to this region. This comes under the head of *Sirdar ko chalano roj pad*. The arrangements for food and other offerings like jaggery, bucks, feed for mules, iron articles and utensils are also given in detail. On the pious occasions, some Brahmin families were also provided with offerings and gifts for their performances of rituals. Not only Brahmins but two special servants are also mentioned several times in

the document, and they are *Pahari* (the guard) and *Bajaniya* (drummer and announcer). Two kinds of *Pahari* are mentioned, one at Rajkot (at Sirdar's fort), the other at the *Devkot* (at god's fort meaning temple).⁷ These servants were provided with a defined quantity of grains from various villages in this region. This was measured in *Nali* (a local measuring pot) and the record mentions that it should be a *Nali of 34 Mutthi*, which means a measuring pot that can contain 34 handfuls of grain.

Then, this document mentions in detail the number of duties to be paid from every village for the purpose of *Jhaguli* and *Angadi*, which means for the arrangements of clothes and royal robes respectively. At the time of two harvest seasons, *katik* and *chait*, *Sirdar* should also be given a certain portion of the produce. In this way, we see that this document is very detailed and tells us not just about the administration of the Chand dynasty but also provides a glimpse of the society and its hierarchies. It is essential, also, to understand the limited availability of the resources in this challenging geographical terrain and how a system and mechanism emerged to tap these resources and distribute them among different classes of society, however, in an unequal way.

The other two bayis, primarily, give a detailed description of land under cultivation and land-revenue grants given to the deities located nearby and far-places, respectively. It is unfortunate that there are still no other comparable documents that could be found anywhere in Kumaon.

These bayis are called in these documents *davthar*, probably a term derived from Persian *daftar*, however here it does not mean office, and it is used to signify official records. These records were kept by *Joshis* of Bayal village, these families were engaged in the practice of record keeping from the time when even the Chand rule was not established in this region.

Raja Bajbahadur Chand gifted them a silver ink-pot and a pen made of gold.⁸

In the Doti region, there was a tradition of record-keeping and there were specific Brahmin subcastes like *Baidar* (bahi/record makers) and *Bayal* (document writers). Not only they recorded the income obtained from subjects, but also the different duties and their rates imposed on different classes and communities were also mentioned in the records. These records also noted down the royal order related to the changes in the rates in different times.⁹ As Doti Brahmins were known for this tradition, they were given land grants on the west side of the Kali-Ganga by Chand rulers of Kumaon. We also know from copper inscriptions and these records that there were officials called *Lekhiya*, but it is not possible to say with certainty that they were also engaged in this detailed record creating practices, however, their names and official positions were frequently mentioned in copper inscriptions and Chitti/ letters written on paper. This is very interesting to note that the position of *Lekhiya* was established in every local administrative unit, like *Kumon ko lekhiya*, *Gangoli ko lekhiya*, *Sira ko bayal*, *Faldakot ko lekhiya*, *Chaugarkha ko lekhiya*, *Pachaun ko lekhiya* and *Sor ko lekhiya*. These records from Batyuli also mention recorders for special purposes like, *Deudi* (royal household) *ko lekhiya*, *Ghoda* (horses) *ko lekhiya*, *Bazar ko lekhiya* and *Ganj ko lekhiya*.¹⁰

So, we can say that in medieval times, in this region, there was a class of record keepers and record makers. However, we have lost most of these documents, on some part, because of the colonial rule and on some part because of our own carelessness towards traditional knowledge systems.

REFERENCES

1. In traditional Kumauni houses, the basements rooms are called Goth, literally meaning a place to keep cows. However, these basement rooms have been used for cooking food, for performing a marriage ceremony and also to organize Bharat and Jagar performances. As these rooms are on a lower level than the main entrance to the house, they can be called cellars; so Goth is a kind of a cow-cellar.
2. Singh, Ram (2002). *Rag-Bhag kali Kumaun* (Nainital: Pahad). pp. 350-358.
3. Singh, Ram (2007). "Sor" (Madhya Himalaya) ka Ateet: Prarambh se San 1857 Tak (New Delhi: Mallika Prakashan) pp.385-389; and pp.410-425.
4. Joshi, Prayag (1996). *Seera Des Ko Davthar Kumaun Raj*(Kanpur: Ajit Offset).
5. Atkinson, E. T. (1981). *The Himalayan Gazetteer*, Vol.2, part 2, (New Delhi: Cosmo Publication). pp.532-33
6. Pande, Badridutt. 2016. *Kumaon ka Itihas* (Almora: Almora Book Depot). p.510.
7. Joshi, opt. cit. p.18. from the first published bayi.
8. Ibid.p.7.
9. Singh(2007). opt.cit. p. 190.
10. Joshi, opt. cit. p.51 और p.58, from the first published bayi.
11. Atkinson.1981. p,496.
12. as cited in Pande (2016). pp 543-546
13. Joshi, M.P. (1994). *Uttaranchal mein Sanskritik Parivartan: Ek Saiddhantik Adhyayan*, in M.P. Joshi and Lalitprabha Joshi (ed.) *Uttaranchal Himalaya: Samaaj, Sanskriti, Itihas ewam Puratatwa.*, (Almora: Almora Book Depot). p. 21
14. Joshi, M.P. (1990). *Kumāoni Vamsāvalis: Myth and Reality*, in *Himalaya: Past and Present*. V.1 p.202.
15. Ibid. p.210
16. Singh opt. cit. p.410.
17. ibid. p. 413-14

18. Atkinson. opt. cit. pp.598-606
19. Singh (2002). p. 350-356
20. for example, Sor's record writer (Patani) joined the Company administration as a record keeper. See, Singh (2007). p.420.