

Folktales From India: A Feminist Perspective

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Folklore is the *traditional* knowledge of a culture, and the word “traditional” carries with it the idea of things that are established, time-honored. We recognize things folkloric as those things that are passed down from one generation to another. (Preface , p vii)

Kenneth L . Untiedt, *Folklore: In All of Us, In All We Do*

According to sacred scriptures, it is universally acknowledged that Indian mythology finds resonance in our day- to- day lives. Folk literature is a true reflection of the cultural beliefs, customs and traditions followed by the people of a particular society. This includes folklore, myths, legends, epics and folktales which acquaint us with the fundamental principles on which society is based. Indian folktales explore a wide range of themes: magic, adventure, love, romance, local deities, medieval heroes etc. Such stories give the readers a deep insight into the characters of men and women and the kind of relationship they share. The qualities associated generally with women are - humility, docility, submissiveness, innocence, tolerance, patience, compassion, passivity etc. It is presumed that women are not intelligent, wise, mature, bold and strong enough to face the world which is dominated by so-called perfect males. People might ignore women’s sensibility and strength but the fact remains that sensible and strong women exist in every society in every age. They are practical and strong rather than fashionable and attractive. The present paper attempts to project a different image of women in the society with special focus on the folktales and folk songs of Uttarakhand. The stories discussed here speak of women who think, feel, perceive, react, respond and appreciate differently from the stereotypical women who have been suppressed through ages.

The mythological figures such as goddesses Nanda, Sati, Parvati, Kali, Sita, Savitri (wife of Satyavan) – they all are symbols of feminine power, fertility, boldness, mental strength, courage, motherly- affection etc. Kusum Budhwar has beautifully compiled some mythological tales of central Himalayas in her book, *Where Gods Dwell: Central Himalayan Folktales and Legends*. Some popular stories from this collection are- *Nanda: Birth of a Goddess*, *Roopkund: The Wrath of a Goddess*, *The Malushahi: The Ballad of Raja Malushah and Rajuli*, *Teelu Rauteli, the Warrior Lass* etc. The story *Nanda: Birth of a Goddess* explains how goddess Nanda was married to lord Shiva and how she managed afterwards. Nanda was married to lord Shiva and taken to his abode (Kailash) . When she reached there, she found it in total contrast to her parents’ home (Rishasau). Her parental place was a nine-pillared beautiful house with all kinds of comforts while lord Shiva’s dwelling place was snow-covered mountains. She realized that there her survival was very difficult. She cursed the elders in Rishasau for her fate. The following lines depict how strong her curse was:

As her curse took effect, Rishasau began to notice its fading fortunes. In the land of plenty, things suddenly began to go awry. Animals began to produce only male or sickly offspring; standing grain wilted in the fields before it could be harvested; the wealth of kingdom dwindled. (13-14)

The sages told the people of Rishasau that they should organize a sacrifice in the name of Nanda to improve the situation. Nanda's parents did the same and sent the invitation to their daughter. Bhole Shankar loved Nanda dearly but she was unhappy in her new home as Bhole Shankar was always found in deep meditation. When Nanda received the invitation, she rushed to tell it to her husband who was in deep meditation. When she disturbed him, he turned furious as he was already tired of listening to her complaints. He forbade her to go home. This shows the male dominance in ancient times. Somehow, she managed to please her lord and sought his permission. It was only after the sacrifice was organized properly that the people of Rishasau began to prosper again. (abridged version)

The story *Roopkund: The Wrath of a Goddess* also symbolizes the feminine anger and strength. Once Nanda was wandering in the forest and she came to know about the kingdom of Kannauj where her country kin Vallabha lived. Vallabha was the daughter of the Raja of Chandpurgarh. Princess Vallabha was married to King Yashdhawal of Kannauj who was very arrogant. He did not believe in culture and traditions. At the time of his marriage, Nanda was not given due importance and respect. So, she decided not to attend the marriage. But, when she saw Vallabha, she wished to meet her. Bhole Shankar knew that their meeting would only bring troubles, but Nanda had decided to meet Vallabha and Yashdhawal. When she was not welcomed by them, she said angrily, "Vallabha, do you not realize that I am your older sister and as such you owe me courtesies appropriate to my status?.....I think you do not deserve this kingdom, hence, I command you to hand it over to me" (22). When Yashdhawal heard this, he got furious and asked Nanda to leave the place. Nanda cursed both of them and soon the fortunes of Kannauj took a downward turn. Then, the royal priest advised Yashdhawal to please the angry goddess, Nanda. Finally, he surrendered and planned his journey to Kailash. This symbolizes the great feminine power and fierce attitude Nanda possessed. She made Yashdhawal realize that if a woman is insulted then nobody can escape her fury. (abridged version)

The Malushahi: The Ballad of Raja Malushah and Rajuli is a very famous romantic epic. The story traces the romance of Raja Malushah and Rajuli, a determined daughter, a quintessential lover and a courageous wife. There was a childless couple, Ganjuli Shaukyana and Sunapati Shauka. One night, Lord Baghnath appeared in Ganjuli's dream and told Ganjuli to go to Uttarayani fair and if she was the first to reach the Treyuga Peepul tree across the Saryu, she would have a child (son or daughter). That very night, the childless queen of Vairat had a similar dream and she was also told that she would have a son. When these two women met there, they felt an affinity and the queen said that if their dreams came true, they would have children. She further asked Ganjuli to give her daughter for her (queen's) son in marriage when they grew up. Their dreams came true. The queen named her son Malushah, while Ganjuli's daughter was called Rajuli. Rajuli grew into a matchless beauty. She was very intelligent and courageous. Ganjuli told Rajuli the story of her birth and Rajuli always asked her mother who that powerful and great king was. She was always obsessed with the idea of meeting Malushah. Meanwhile, Rajuli's parents were planning for her marriage. A proposal came for her from a neighbouring state. He was Vishayapala, a powerful chieftain in the vicinity of Askot. Rajuli reacted angrily, "Destruction take that land!

I'll die before going to that accursed country. How can you give me to those unsophisticated, boorish people? (97)". Three days passed in trying to persuade Rajuli but she didn't agree. She was determined to go and see Malushah. Engrossed in her own thoughts, she didn't care for anything. Neither the thorny Hisalu nor the sharp Kilmora grass bothered her. Many wicked men tried to exploit her innocence but she never gave up. She behaved courageously and used her wit. Defeating all odds, finally she reached Dwarahat. There, Phachuwa Doryala (the richest cattle owner in the town) proposed her but Rajuli declined his proposal. When he kept insisting, she thought of a good plan. She said very sweetly:

All right, I will consider your proposal but on one condition. If you can dance as well as the Raja of Vairat is reputed to, then I will stay and be your wife. If not, I will leave. (102)

Phachuwa kept dancing and Rajuli slipped away secretly. Finally, Rajuli reached Vairat. In dark, she entered the palace secretly and approached Malushah. He looked very handsome. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and requested Rajuli to tell who she was. Rajuli introduced herself and told him the whole story. He was so much impressed by her bravery and courage that he decided to go to her place and ask for her hand. He remarked:

My reputation is at stake because a courageous young girl came personally, against all odds, to challenge me face-to-face. I cannot let her down or else people will say that Malushah is a coward. (104-105)

With a heavy heart, the Queen permitted him to go. When he reached at Rajuli's place, marriage preparations were in full swing. Rajuli recognised the people sent by Malushah to her place and she persuaded her mother to let her go outdoors. Malushah was waiting for her disguised as an ascetic. Soon, the parents of Rajuli found her missing. When Vishayapala came to know about it, he was furious. He held Sunapati responsible for everything. Sunapati convinced him that he was not involved in anything. There had been a violent fight between the armies of Vishayapala and Malushah. Finally, Vishayapala gave up the chase and Malushah took the beautiful Rajuli to his mother and peace prevailed in the land. (abridged version)

The story *Teelu Rauteli, the Warrior Lass* is the story of a very bold ,courageous and fearless girl. She is called the Rani Lakshmibai of Garhwal. She was the daughter of Bhoop Singh Gauria, a merchant of Chandkot Pargana. She had two brave and loyal brothers, Bhagatu and Pathwa (twins). Bhoop Singh engaged his daughter at the age of fifteen. Unfortunately, the enemies killed her would be husband before marriage. Once, the Katyuri king, Dham Shahi, attacked Raja Man Shah of Garhwal at Khairagarh. Man Shah was brutally defeated and Khairagarh came under the custody of Dham Shahi who exploited and oppressed the people. The people were quite unhappy and depressed. Thus the land was plunged into sorrow. Quickly, a revolt against the Katyuri kingdom began to gain momentum. Bhoop Singh attempted to drive the Katyuris back but was killed in the war. His sons took up the arms and continued to fight but they also lost their lives fighting for Garhwal. Later, Teelu decided to avenge the deaths of her father and brothers. Many young braves of all castes joined her army, armed with weapons and they all were ready to sacrifice their

lives. Finally, Teelu Rauteli and her army freed Khairagarh from Katyuri army. This brave woman became a martyr at the age of only 22. (abridged version)

There is a famous Garhwali song that depicts the bravery and courage of Teelu Rauteli. Some famous lines from the song are:

Teelu Rauteli tum purana hathyar pujawa dhaka dhai dhai Apni dhal katar
talwar sajawa dhaka dhai dhai Ghimandu ki hudki bajan lage dhaka dhai dhai O
ranshur saj sajik aige Teelu Rauteli dhaka dhai dhai...

(<http://www.merapahadforum.com/uttarakhand-history-and-peoples-movement/teelu-rauteli-greatest-female-warriors-from-gahrwal/>.)

It means that Teelu Rauteli should worship all her old weapons. She should keep her shield, sword and dagger ready for the fight. The enemy looks frightened as Teelu Rauteli has dressed herself as a warrior. It means that she is physically and mentally prepared for the war.

Despite all this, the fact remains that the condition of women in Uttarakhand is not very good. They are exploited by men. There are some popular Garhwali-Kumaoni Chanchari songs that reflect the same theme. Dr Nand Kishor Hatwal has compiled many beautiful songs in his book *Uttarakhand Himalaya ke Chanchari Geet evam Nritya*. Some songs depicting the pathetic condition of women are : *Kiyo Myero Buru Lakshima, Chhamiyan Ku, Basi Roti Maa Khai Jalo Guda etc.* The following lines from *Kiyo Myero Buru Lakshima* reflect the pain of a girl who is blaming her parents for her ill- fate:

Babaji ne paisa khayi, khai myero maas Lakshima
Babaji ne baur khoji, palajugi maudun Lakshima
Babaji ne paisa khayi, khayi myero khoon Lakshima...(p 420)

Here the girl is telling her friend Lakshima that her father has not done good to her. He has chosen a very weak and ugly man as her husband just for money.

The song *Chhamiyan Ku* is a girl's plea to her father not to pressurize her to marry an old man. She is ready to marry a monkey but she will not accept an old man as her husband. The following lines express the feelings of the girl:

Main buwa chhamiya ko ni denu, Chhamiya khankarako bhogi. Main buwa
Bander ku denu, Bander sonta-fole lahalo. (p 421)

The girl tells her father not to force her to marry an old man (chhamiya) as he is suffering from cough. She requests him to let her marry a monkey instead as he would bring her soft branches and seed-pods.

Feminist Folktales from India is a wonderful story collection by Qiron Adhikary. Here we find stories that present a bold image of women. Some interesting stories from this collection are- *The Woman Who Married a Dead Man, The Farmer's Clever Bride, How the Mahi River Married the Sea etc.* *The Woman Who Married a Dead Man (Assam)* is the story of Maya who was destined to marry a dead man. Once she was wandering in the forest with her mother. They reached a large palace which seemed uninhabited. Maya pushed on the gate. It opened, but as soon as Maya entered, it was shut and her mother couldn't enter. There she found a handsome young man whose name was Jaya. He

offered her food and drink. He disclosed the secret of his life to her that he would be dead as soon as the sun's first ray showed in the sky. Jaya told Maya not to be afraid as he would come to life as soon as the sun set. They started living together. Maya pressed him hard to tell her why he was dead every morning but he wouldn't tell. After five years, Maya grew into a beautiful young woman. They decided to get married. The couple was blessed with a baby girl. One day, Maya very cleverly remarked, "Now you are my husband, and I am your wife. And a husband and wife should have no secrets between them. So tell me, why do you die every morning? (26)". Jaya remarked, "What a clever wife I have married (26)"! Jaya told her the entire story that he was a prince but he was destined to suffer as the result of a curse. His mother prayed for him and her devotion was so strong that Goddess herself appeared and gave her a necklace to place around the prince's neck. When his mother died, his father remarried and the new queen stole the necklace. When she wore it in the morning, the prince was dead and when she removed it in the evening, the prince regained consciousness. The bold and beautiful Maya decided to bring the necklace back to save her husband's life. She approached the queen and requested her to hire her (Maya) for some work. The queen employed her and she did everything to please the queen. The queen trusted her and one day very cleverly she acquired the necklace making the excuse that her baby wanted to play with it. The very next moment, she disappeared. Thus, Maya brought her husband back to life. They reached the king's palace and narrated the whole story. The king remarked, "Truly, my son, you have a wonderful wife. No matter how you have suffered, she has made up for it all (30)". Thereafter, they lived happily. (abridged version)

The Farmer's Clever Bride (Uttar Pradesh) is the story of a clever and tricky girl (Maya) who was married to a farmer. The farmer resolved not to look at her as he was misguided by his friend who was a barber that Maya was a bad cook and not pretty at all. He did this out of jealousy as his own wife was rather plain and not a good cook. The farmer blindfolded himself during the marriage ceremony and always remained like that in front of his wife. The clever wife thought of a wise plan and she approached her husband while he was gambling with his friend. He was so impressed by her divine beauty that he played the game with her sending his friend on an errand. In the game, he lost all his money, ring, bracelet etc. She invited the farmer to her village and he decided to go there to win his things back. He started his journey with his friend (barber). Maya prepared food for them and very cleverly put all the jewels she won from her husband into the bread she prepared for the farmer. When he started eating, he got all his things back. He was surprised to think how it happened. He went home immediately and saw Maya cooking food. He understood everything and remarked, "You deceived me very successfully" (35). Thus, Maya won her husband's love and affection. (abridged version)

Folktales from India is another excellent story collection by A K Ramanujan. Here we find some great women-centered tales. These tales explain the heroic works performed by women in complicated situations. These stories reflect their wisdom, witticism, cleverness and mental strength etc. Some interesting stories from this collection are- *The Clever Daughter-in-Law, In Another Country, Prince Sabar* etc. *The Clever Daughter-in-Law (Kannada)* is the story of a young woman who was ill-treated by her mother-in-

law. The daughter-in-law did all the housework but she was not given proper food. She survived on stale rice and leftovers. Her husband was also a heartless person. If his wife wept, his mother would abuse her, "You slut, you hussy, you want to wash away our house in your tears and bring bad luck, you daughter of a whore... (40)". In season, the mother-in-law would make delicious snake-gourd *talada* which she and her son would eat to the full and give the daughter-in-law their leavings. Once, the clever daughter-in-law befooled her mother-in-law. She misinformed her about her sister's illness. The mother-in-law left home in a hurry. That day the daughter-in-law made some more *talada* and prepared all good dishes. After serving her husband, she went to the temple of Kali and ate the entire potful of *talada*. She did not notice even Kali, who in amazement put her right hand on her mouth. When she returned home, the mother-in-law got furious. Meanwhile, the rumour spread that some calamity was going to fall as Kali was seen with her hand on her mouth. People thought that the goddess was angry. People prayed, performed many religious ceremonies, but nothing could please the goddess. The daughter-in-law assured them that she could solve the problem. The mother-in-law was furious but finally she permitted her to proceed. The daughter-in-law took her broomstick and the garbage basket and went to the temple of Kali. She invoked Kali:

You jealous female! What's it to you if I ate my snake-gourd *talada*. Why do your eyes burn? If you'd only asked me, I'd have given you some. May your face burn, may your cheeks swell and explode, may your eyes sink in and go blind! Will you take your hand off your mouth now or shall I beat you with my broomstick? Now! (42)

She gave Kali a thrashing and Kali removed her hand from her mouth. The villagers became very happy and gave her many gifts. The mother and the son then realized that she had supernatural powers and she would punish them for treating her so badly. They devised a plan. They wrapped her in her mat and took her to the fields to burn her. When they went to look for firewood, she cleverly relieved her and wrapped a log in her bedclothes and mat. When the mother and the son returned, they set fire to the log and it burnt. Thus, she escaped her fate and then she befooled a gang of thieves. She took their gold, jewels, money and jewellery and returned home. She told her mother-in-law that Yama had sent her back and asked to send her mother-in-law instead as she was a sinner. She further conveyed her that she begged him to spare her mother-in-law as she was a good woman. The mother-in-law was very pleased with her and she never troubled her again. (abridged version)

In Another Country (Punjabi) is the story of a woman who solved the riddle that her husband couldn't do and saved her husband's life. A young man lost his father soon after he got married. After his father's death, he went to fetch his wife from her home. On the way, he found a mongoose and a snake fighting fiercely. He tried to separate them but failed. Finally, he drew his sword and killed the mongoose. Thus, the snake was saved but it didn't let the man go and wished to eat him. The man was amazed. Then the snake told him that it was a custom there to return evil for good. The man tried to argue with the snake but it was of no use. So, the man requested the snake to spare him for eight days and the snake agreed. The man stayed with his wife and in-laws for eight days and then he prepared to leave with his wife. He didn't tell anyone

the cause of his worry. When they had left the village, the man told his wife and servants to go back home. He told them that he was going to die, but the brave wife didn't leave him to suffer his fate. When he called the snake, his wife tried to convince the snake but it wouldn't listen to her pleas. Then she cleverly remarked, "You say that in this country people do evil for good. That's really a strange custom, and so very unreasonable that I'd like to know the history of it. How did it all come about" (296)? Then the snake told her to go to the *talli* trees and ask them. She did the same. The tree answered that there were six trees but one could see only five trees there. The tree told her that once a thief hid himself in the cavity of the sixth tree and the people couldn't trace him. Later the tree opened its sides and let the man go. The thief left with the scent of sandalwood all over him. People asked him about it but he didn't tell anyone the secret. A shrewd and cunning man informed the king about it and he had to tell him (king) the secret. The king ordered to cut the tree down and bring it to his palace. Then the law was passed that whosoever did good, would be repaid in evil. The wife went to the snake and said, "What will become of me? If you must eat my husband, you must begin by eating me" (298). The snake said that she had done nothing good or bad to it, so how it could eat her. She remarked:

But if you eat my husband, what's left for me? You yourself said that I've done you no good, and yet you want to hurt me and destroy my happiness. How can you?
(298)

The snake felt remorse and tried to console her. It gave the woman two magic pills and told her to swallow them and she would have two lovely sons. The woman wittily remarked, "But what about my good name? Without my husband, my sons will be called bastards" (299). The snake gave her two more pills and advised her to rub them gently over the person who said anything wrong about her and it would make the person go up in smoke and ashes. The woman applied the same trick on the snake. The next moment, it disappeared and only a line of dust could be seen on the ground. Thus the brave and clever wife saved her husband. (abridged version)

There are some famous Kumaoni and Garhwali proverbs that project women as bold, confident, courageous and convincing. One such proverb is - *Junwan ki bhainsa* (a louse exaggerated into a buffalo). Pandit Ganga Datt Upreti quotes the story based on this proverb in his famous book *Proverbs and Folklore of Kumaun and Garhwal*. A man and his wife lived in a village. The man was cowardly and lazy, while his wife was a wise and active woman. Whenever she advised her husband to work, he would get angry and frighten his wife saying that he would leave his house and go to some foreign country. The wife always lived in fear of losing him. One day she got fed up and allowed him to leave. The day he left, she disguised herself as a policeman and waylaid her husband, whom she threatened with instant death if he did not return home. She followed her husband secretly and managed to return home earlier than her husband. Soon, the coward man also returned home. On being inquired, he remarked, "O dear wife, how could I go to the Plains, for a hundred policemen came to kill me? (54)". His wife doubted if they were really hundred or fifty. He agreed and his wife commented, "I think twenty-five even would have been more than sufficient to deter you" (54). He agreed that they were indeed twenty-five. Finally, the stupid

husband confessed that there was only one policeman who prevented him from going away. Thus, the wife taught her husband a lesson. (abridged version)

There is another Kumaoni and Garhwali proverb- *Apana bhaga ko khano* (One will suffer what fate has decreed). Pandit Ganga Datt Upreti quotes the story based on this proverb in the same book, *Proverbs and Folklore of Kumaun and Garhwal*. The story is about a king and his seven daughters. One day he asked them through whose luck they got their maintenance. All of them except the youngest remarked, "O Father, we as well as the world under your sceptre depend on your good luck for maintenance and protection (65)". The youngest said that though he had given her birth, still she would have to undergo whatever there might be in her luck. She did not at all depend on his luck. This made the king furious and he expelled her from his palace. He placed her where four roads met to be taken away by anybody who might wish to have her. But he gave the other daughters to powerful and wealthy princes in marriage with a huge amount of dowry.

The banished girl made up her mind to make the first person she met her husband. The first person she met was a woodman who used to earn money by selling firewood. She followed him to his home. There she came to know that he had been supplying the sandal wood to the king on credit for many years and received only two anas (about 1-1/2 pence) a day. She prepared a bill summary deducting what he had already received which amounted to a lac of rupees and advised her husband to demand the same from the king. He did so and he got a lac of rupees. Then, she decided to live in a big palace. She selected a site and when it was dug, she saw four precious rubies and gold there. The rubies were sold and she got four lacs rupees. This money she invested in various kinds of trade and soon her husband became a king. Once the hereditary king was attacked and the new king saved him. He didn't know that the new king was his son-in-law. After this, one day the new king invited the other king with his royal family to a feast. There the wife of the new king saluted and addressed the other king as her father. The king recognised her and realized that every one ought to depend on his/her own kismet. (abridged version)

Despite the rights given to women in various countries, they are still suffering. We can't ignore the fact that women have been exploited since ages. The oppression of women is a serious and major concern. In a country like India, it is even a more important issue. But, history reveals that we had strong women in the past also, like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sita, Sati, Rajia Sultan, Savitri, Draupadi etc. The courage shown by Rani Lakshmi in the battle field is a source of motivation. The resolution of Nanda (wife of lord Shiva), Savitri (wife of Satyavan), Draupadi (wife of Pandavas) and the inner strength of Sita (wife of lord Rama) offer inspiration. Sita accompanied Rama when was exiled for 14 years. Savitri challenged Yama, the god of death to save the life of her husband, Satyavan. Nanda dared to move Shiva (a complete yogi) from his deep meditation. Actually, it's 'culture and conditioning' which makes boys behave like boys (violent and furious), and girls like girls (weak and submissive). This ideology needs to be changed. All the stories discussed here highlight the fact that modern woman has come a long way, but still she has many things to learn from the past. She must understand that there is no need to go against males, rather she should attempt

to eradicate what is socially undesirable and intolerable and for that she has to be strong and assertive.

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