

# A Note on the Concept of 'Shaha'

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'Shaha' is a widely prevalent concept in the central and parts of the eastern Himalaya with which I am somewhat familiar. According to Sapkota's Dictionary (1977) it has a number of meanings: the month of Mangsir (November-December); economical; produce; satisfactory condition of grains, wealth, etc.; sufficiency; purchasability; sense of inexhaustability; etc. The word *Shahakāl*, accordingly, refers to a period of good rains, good harvest, and cheaper cost of living; opposite of *anikāl* or famine; and the year of birth. The last variation in the meaning of *Shahakāl* indicates that even 'reproduction' or 'birth' is comparable to a good harvest. The central meaning hereabove is a state of agricultural well-being. But, as we shall see, its meaning is much wider and also includes familial and partly social well-being.

The concept of 'shaha' is not only spatially widespread but also cuts across the boundaries of caste, creed, class, education, and religion. I am quite sanguine that this concept exists in other parts of India as well though with slight variations in its meaning, which is quite natural as the transition from folk to peasant or industrial/urban society is not always qualitatively even. Besides, ecological conditions vary from bad to worst in most parts of India even today and technological innovations to overcome such conditions have not reached everywhere.

It should also be pointed out here that this concept is seldom challenged: even those who do not always adhere to often tend to argue in favour of it. Thus the concept of 'Shaha' is still alive. It still guides the behaviour or actions of people in which sense it is a folkway. If there is any difference it is in the field of their operation. While a folkway operates at the inter-familial level the concept of 'Shaha' primarily operates within the family. If a folkway is ignored one may invite mild ridicule or social boycott but the non-observance of many precepts of 'Shaha' do not at all hurt the social sentiment

and the society is least bothered to see if they are being observed. Only those precepts of 'Shaha', which are related to agriculture, may in fact be considered as well within the domain of a folkway. For instance, if any maxim of 'Shaha' is violated on the threshing ground the deviant may be subjected to ridicule or even rebuff by others even if the person concerned may be the owner of the threshing ground. Thus the difference between a folkway and 'Shaha' is not so properly defined.

Surprisingly, such an important concept does not seem to have attracted the attention of any social scientist working on the Himalaya until today. They must have ignored, as I once did myself, this concept as a body of superstitions, which it is but only until and unless its meanings and significations are explored and thereby known. It was a sheer accident that I tumbled over this concept recently while preparing a seminar paper for Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. I could then devote only a small paragraph to this concept while trying to depict people's perception of the deteriorating ecological conditions in the Darjeeling and Sikkim hills. I present here whatever I have been able to gather about this concept afterwards. Needless to mention that the ideas expressed here are at their formative stage.

I have classified the field in which this concept operates into four: (i) agriculture, (ii) livestock, (iii) household, and (iv) miscellaneous. This classification is no doubt arbitrary but nonetheless helpful for further discussion here. I shall first enumerate some of the 'Shaha' precepts in each of these four fields. It is believed that 'Shaha' will 'stay' if:

### 1. In agriculture :

- a. a bunch of flowers are kept on the top of the *Kunyu* or dome-like pile of unthreshed paddy on the threshing ground, which is worshipped with burning butter before dismantling it for threshing;
- b. a bunch of unthreshed paddy and flowers hung on the top of *Mehey* (*Miyo* in Nepal) or the bamboo pole around which oxen revolve for final threshing;
- c. the winnower is run clockwise around the pile of grains and a

sickle planted on the top of the pile ;

- d. the winnower does not hit the threshing ground ;
- e. no whistling is done on the threshing ground ;
- f. the pile of grains is touched only after hearing the mowing of a cow or cuckooing of a koel and burning butter or *Nauni dhup* ; and
- g. a small bunch of unthreshed maize, millet or paddy is kept hung in a corner of the house until the next harvest.

## 2. In livestock :

- a. the cowdung is removed with hand.
- b. the placenta is hung on such trees which, when cut, oozes out milky content ; and
- c. the colostrum is cooked, wrapped in banana leaves, held between bamboo splits, and hung on the ceiling or roof of the kitchen.

## 3. In household :

- a. rice or pulses are not trampled ;
- b. a small amount of rice, pulses or cereals lent out or almed away is kept behind:
- c. no whistling or sighing is done inside the house ;
- d. the broom is not kept upside down, trampled or crossed over ;
- e. house-daubing is done from outside to inside : reverse only after a death has occurred in the house ;
- f. brooming the floor is not done after sunset ;
- g. hair and nails are not trimmed inside the house ; and
- h. cash is not taken out after it is dark.

## 4. In miscellaneous :

- a. a thorn is not taken out at night ;
- b. combing the hair or looking at the mirror is not done after it is dark ;
- c. face is not washed after sunset ;
- d. eggs, turmeric and lime are not lent out at night : if these have to be borrowed different words are used while asking ; and

e. eggs are not passed from hand to hand.

One can add on to this list. What I am more interested in here is exploring folkloric and semiotic significance of such precepts all of which draw their legitimacy from the concept of 'Shaha'.

1a is a sort of worshipping the harvest, which is nothing surprising in folk societies where it is common to worship various elements of nature. It also shows the aesthetic sense of such people who take extra care to give the pile of paddy an attractive appearance that resembles a dome or the grain-filled copper container called *pāthi*. Flat wooden pieces are often used to shape up the outer part of the *Kunyu* which looks incomplete without the flowers on the top. 1b expresses both the sense of beauty and showering of happiness which is symbolised by the grains falling on the ground as the oxen shake the bamboo pole.

1c implies imaginary protection of the grains from evil eyes. 1d is a precaution against carelessness, which may cause a handful of grain to be thrown out of the threshing ground at one time. The semiotic significance of 1e is that silence and quietitude are ideal for welcoming the 'Shaha' while whistling or laughing about drives it away. Waiting for the cow to mow or the koel to cuckoo in 1f signifies two separate things. First, the cow-worship being common her voice becomes auspicious for the starting of measuring the grains. The cult of Gorakhanath also being strong in the entire western and central Himalaya the mowing of the cow holds special meaning. Secondly, the cuckooing of the koel signifies the approaching of the spring season—the season of reproduction, fertility and laughter. Finally, 1g ensures that there is some seed to sow if rest of the grains gets consumed up.

2a also shows the love for the cow. If the cowdung is removed with a fork, the floor becomes uneven and uneasy for the cows to lie on. But if it is removed with hand the floor remains even and precludes all chances of injuring the cow's skin. 2b is an expression of a wish for more milk which symbolises an increased sense of economic well-being. And 2c is a kind of worship to the unseen 'protector of cows' and a symbolic way of receiving psychological assurance that nothing untoward would befall.

3a makes people avoid unnecessary wastage of food grains.

Trampling on them or throwing them about the floor without any ritual reason would offend the 'Shaha' and make it leave the house. The adherence to 3b makes it possible for one to lend out or alm away to a larger number of people or for a longer of time than one who does not conform to it. No particular reason for 3c was found but 'whistling' semiotically refers to the lack of quietitude, peace, and civility or 'polite formulas' ( Silverman 1983 : 5 ). And 'sighing' is a sign of emptiness, exhaustion, and exasperation, none of which is compatable to the concept of 'Shaha'. 3d has both physical and semiotic significance. Physically, this ensures durability of the broom. And semiotically, it is an object of worship. In olden days the broom used to be made of a special fern called *Babiyo* which was believed to have medicinal or disinfecting properties. The extinction of this fern gave place to *Amliso*—another fern which is not known to have medicinal property but believed to be an enemy of female sorcerist or *bokshi* and is thus considered as holy as the *Babiyo*. Thus, the material of the broom has changed but the symbolic significance of it has not.

3e signifies humility and hospitality ( *Atithi Sewā* ). In many houses of the Himalayan villages there is still no separate room where passers-by or visitors could probably stay for sometime or overnight. The *sikuwā* or verandah is the typical place for such guests. Thus, if the house-daubing begins from inside to outside someone may turn up and the work may remain incomplete. Semiotically, daubing from outside to inside means 'gathering', 'collecting', 'bringing in' etc. while inside to outside signifies 'throwing away', 'getting rid of', 'disposing of', etc. which are antithetical to the concept of 'Shaha'. House-daubing from inside to outside after death in the house, therefore, signifies throwing away all the ills and evils or cleansing the house to make it habitable for the 'Shaha'.

3f is observed so that any valuable fallen on the floor may not get swept away unnoticed in the absence of adequate light. Similarly 3g ensures that hair and nails do not fall on food and casuse any health hazard. And 3h saves one from making over payment/lending or under payment/lending in the absence of adequate light in folk societies.

Similarly, 4a is observed partially because one may not be able to see a thorn properly at night. One may dig a pin into a wrong place

and cause septic. But the adherence to this precept has a semiotic significance too. A thorn is taken as a living being that has taken refuge in the body for the night. It is sinful to throw away any insect, be it a fly or a grasshopper, at night. Superstition has it that even the deadliest among ghosts does no harm if someone takes refuge at its feet. The implication is that human beings should be more considerate.

4b ensures that the food taken is without hair which, if eaten, is damaging to one's health. 4c helps the women avoid the chances of losing small pieces of their gold earrings and noserings at night. The observance of 4d is also not without significance. One may be tripped over a stone or by a rope at night and the eggs may get broken; one may mistake any powder for turmeric at night; and lime could get into the eyes and cause permanent damage. The same stands about 4e. If eggs are passed from hand to hand the chances of their falling on the ground are more than when first kept on a proper place and picked up from there.

Some of the precepts enumerated here apparently do not have any semiotic significance but it would be rather superficial to remark that they do not have such significance. If the practice of a certain belief forms the pattern of a society it tends to assume near-indexical image (to use a semiological term) and thereby fall within the jurisdiction of the study of semiotics. The need for symbols and signification has always been as essential to social living as the fulfilment of biological needs for an animal.

To conclude, the concept of 'Shaha' has served the Himalayan societies as a symbol of insurance against drought and famine, against health hazards and any possible catastrophe. The function of such a symbol has not eroded even today. Despite technological breakthrough most rural areas still lack electricity, roads, public media, irrigation facilities, and other such civic amenities. Even when all this is materialized, the concept of 'Shaha' may continue to linger on, as it has, even in the urban societies of the Himalaya.

#### References :

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