

Communication through Rituals: A Study of Narratives around the Ramayana in Dronagiri Village of Uttarakhand

Author: Sudheer Deoli,
Ph.D. Research Scholar, School of Media and Communication Studies,
Doon University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand

Co-Author: Dr. Rajesh Kumar,
HoD, School of Media and Communication Studies,
Doon University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand

Abstract

Dronagiri is a small village in the Niti Valley of Uttarakhand. It is inhabited by the Bhotia tribe. The village is situated in the mountains under the sacred *Bagni* glacier. The village is a culturally rich place. There are many rituals related to many local gods. The village has a strong belief that during Tretayug, in search of *Sanjeevani*, Lord Hanuman lifted Dronagiri Parvat from this area. Therefore, Lord Hanuman is revered in a different way in this village. The Bhotia people put a lot of faith in the Lord Hanuman. However, due to their belief in certain rituals and practises that are part of the culture, this village is quite distinctive in the entire valley. This study focuses on the rituals and practises that have become part of their culture. Moreover, the particular tradition related to Lord Hanuman has created a unique status for the village, whereby it has gained popularity through the media. The researcher has used secondary data and interview methods to decipher many aspects related to the beliefs of the villagers in the context of the Ramayana. The study suggests that villagers are well aware of the unique tradition of their village. They are also aware that the different traditions related to Lord Hanuman do not deter individuals from having immense faith in the deity.

Key Words: Communication, Rituals, Bhotia, Lord Hanuman, Tretayug, *Sanjeevani*, Dronagiri

Introduction: Uttarakhand is home to five very prominent tribes. These are Buxa, Tharu, Raji, Jaunsari, and Bhotia. According to the Census of India (2011), Bhotia is the fourth largest tribal group in the state (Major Tribes of Uttarakhand, n.d.). The Bhotia people inhabit Pithoragarh district in the east and Chamoli and Uttarkashi in the west of the state. The tribe is known by different names in these districts. The Bhotia people live in the Niti and Mana Valleys of Chamoli district. The Mana valley is the abode of the famous Badrinath, whereas the Niti valley is home to a good number of Bhotia villages.

Both the valleys are at the cusp of the Indo-China border. So, Bhotia people regard themselves as the guardians of the land of India. In September 2016, Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh called the Bhotia people a strategic asset for India. (Upadhyay, 2018).

The Bhotia people have a unique practice called transhumance, which is also called "*Masma*" in their native dialect. It is the practice of moving herds of domestic cattle, particularly sheep, goats, cows, bulls, and dogs, between low lands during the extreme winters and high lands during the summers. It is the repeated habitation of people and their animals along well-established migratory routes between winter and summer grazing areas (Rawat, 2013).

Both the Niti Valley as well as the Mana Valley come under the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve. The Bhotia people have revered the biosphere reserve as a holy place since the beginning of time. They have institutionalised numerous resource conservation and management practices related to ecology over the years (Sharma, 2010).

Amongst the many Bhotia villages in the Niti valley, Dronagiri holds a special place. It is a village which is linked to one of the threads of the Ramayana. The place is synonymous with Lord Hanuman.

Figure 1: Dronagiri Village

Source: Facebook Sudheer Deoli

During the Ramayana, Lord Ram's brother Lakshman was hurt. Lord Hanuman was tasked with bringing "Sanjeevani," a curing herb, from the Himalay. According to belief in Dronagiri village, after failing to find



Sanjeevani, Lord Hanuman lifted a part of the Dronagiri Parvat. The villagers believe that Lord Hanuman confused their *Parvat Devta* and took the herb (Trivedi, 2017).

Due to the popular beliefs related to Dronagiri and Lord Hanuman, a few rituals with regards to Ramleela and Lord Hanuman have become part of the culture of Dronagiri village. This paper aims to study these rituals through appropriate methods.

Literature Review: Rituals are a significant tool of identity reaffirmation for a tribe. Brower C William (1983) in his paper "Inupiat Ritual and Identity" highlights that ethnic groups can be distinguished through their rituals. They make indigenous people aware of ethnic distinctions by highlighting particular traditions. Rituals also boost a sense of pride, distinctive identity, and common goal among the members of a group.

Rituals communicate in a distinct manner. They don't just reinforce the identity in a short period of time (Ritual View of Communication Essay, 2022). Rituals are communicated over generations through ceremonies and festivities. James W. Carey (1992) in his book "Communication as Rituals: Essays on Media and Society" highlights that the ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time. (p. 18).

On a similar note, the Bhotia people of the Niti and Mana valleys perform various ceremonies during the festivals. A lot of their rituals are interlinked between the local deities and the ecology. At the higher altitudes in both the valleys, there are sacred glaciers which are considered more than a natural resource. The Mana valley has the famous *Satopanth* glacier, whereas the Niti valley has the famous *Bagni* glacier.

When Bhotia people return to their villages in the highlands, they usually begin by worshipping their local deity. In many Bhotia villages of the Niti valley, *Bhumiya Devta* (The God of Land) occupies a prominent space. The deity is also known as *Ghantakaran* and *Kshetrpal* (Rawat, 2013). While in Dronagiri village, *Parvat Devta* is a local deity related to the village. The deity is a reflection of the affinity between the villagers and Dronagiri Parvat. The village of Dronagiri is a gateway to the *Bagni* glacier (Dronagiri trek, n.d.). Every year, the pooja for *Parvat Devta* is held in the month of June.



Figure 2: Signboard at the Jumma, entrance for Dronagiri Village

Source: Hindustan Times

Ever since the government of Uttarakhand named Dronagiri as the trek of the year 2017, the popularity of the village has increased many folds (Sharma, 2017). Today, the popular belief of Lord Hanuman taking the *Sanjeevani* from Dronagiri finds lots of space in many social media blogs and reports.

Many reports on internet do mention that due to the popular belief of Lord Hanuman taking the portion of Dronagiri Parvat, a curtailed Ramleela is staged in the village. Lord Hanuman does not feature in it. Like many diverse tales related to Ramayana, Dronagiri has its own share related to it (Semwal, 2019).

Historian Sitanath Dey (2005) highlights that through popular tales, paintings, episodes, folklore, and oral traditions, Ramayana is integrated seamlessly into the lives of our people, just like air and water do. It has reached people living even in the most remote areas of this enormous country, piercing their hearts with its immortal message.

Similarly, through the trail to *Sanjeevani*, Lord Hanuman carved out a tradition for Dronagiri and the entire Niti Valley. Thus, Dronagiri has its own share of heritage with regards to Ramayana. Through many tales, Ramayana binds the entire region.

Research Methodology: The study under focus is qualitative in nature. It deals with rituals and communication. Therefore, it is imperative for researchers to use methods that guide respondents into a comfortable situation where they can express themselves without any restriction. For such a situation to arise, the researcher has used semi-structured interviews for data collection.

In a semi-structured interview, questions are posed within a prepared theme framework as a means of gathering data. But neither the order nor the words of the questions are predetermined. Semi-structured interviews are frequently qualitative in character when used in research (George, 2022).

For semi-structured interviews, five notable villagers from Dronagiri village were chosen. Influential individuals from the village were identified and selected for the interview as part of a purposeful random sample strategy. These are the people who are influential not only within the village but outside of it as well. These people are familiar with the various facets of their village's ritualistic heritage.

These villagers have a significant status within the village. One respondent was Mr. Diwan Singh. He is called the *Paswa* of *Parvat Devta*. A *Paswa* is a person whose body is entered by the gods when they are invoked through *Jagars*. *Jagar* is a musical form which is sung during the festivals. Mr. Diwan Singh is the main person to perform the rituals while worshipping the *Parvat Devta*.

The second respondent was Mr. Uday Singh Rawat. Mr. Rawat is a well-known face in the Bhotia community due to his social work activities. It was essential to know his point of view about the Ramayana and Dronagiri.

The third respondent was an out married girl, Hema Rawat. Hema is married into a family that lives in Munsiyari, Pithoragarh.

The fourth respondent was Mr. Harak Singh. Mr. Harak Singh is a senior administrative officer in the Uttarakhand government. He has significant influence in the village.

The fifth respondent was Mr. Aalam Singh. Mr. Singh possessed a good knowledge of the local history and tradition.

The study did a comprehensive analysis of the narrative through secondary data as well. Collecting various data points and evaluating beliefs about Lord Hanuman and Dronagiri Parvat in relation to Ramayana. These reports were examined and compared to the answers given by the interview respondents.

Findings and Interpretation: For analysing the secondary data, various blogs, books, and news reports were thoroughly read and evaluated. There is a good amount of literature regarding Dronagiri and the narrative related to it.

Mrinal Pande (2016) in her article "The *Sanjeevani* quest: An Uttarakhand village hasn't forgiven Hanuman for defacing their holy mountain" for scroll.in writes, "as news of the Uttarakhand government's decision to launch a Rs 25-crore expedition in the upper reaches of the Himalayas to find the mythical life-restoring *Sanjeevani* herb goes viral, this is a good time to recall that the people of a Himalayan village still haven't forgiven the monkey god Hanuman for disfiguring the mountain on which this mythical plant grew".

The words such as "Monkey God" and "disfiguring the mountain" never became a part of the interviews while interviewing the respondents. It was very evident from their answers that the practise of not worshipping Lord Hanuman in their village has not deterred their faith in the deity. Whenever and wherever they get the chance, they do take time to worship Lord Hanuman in temples. Hema Rawat went further in elaborating that despite the ritual in their village, she has always learnt the value of unconditional love and service from Ramayana and Lord Hanuman.

Compared to the report in the Scroll.in, a report in the Hindustan Times uses a different set of words to explain the Dronagiri's special connection with Lord Hanuman. Anupam Trivedi (2017), in his report "Locals in Dronagiri believe Hanuman will change their fortunes," writes that despite the rituals, Dronagiri in Uttarakhand has become synonymous with Lord Hanuman. He goes on writing that Dronagiri is a trekker's heaven. With the government of Uttarakhand promoting trekking in the region, villagers were hopeful that Lord Hanuman would bring prosperity to their village. Quoting one Hiwali Devi, the report mentions that for individuals, Lord Hanuman carries a greater sense of self-belief.

A report in ABP Ganga (2020) adds that villagers in Dronagiri and *Parvat Devta* are particularly connected. According to the account, Lord Hanuman did not ask permission to take the *Sanjeevani* when *Parvat Devta* was meditating. He unintentionally uprooted the *Parvat Devta's* entire right hand as a result, and the wound is still bleeding today. Therefore, in Dronagiri village, residents refrain from putting red flags outside their homes for this reason.

Respondent Balam Singh mentions that Dronagiri starts the pooja for *Parvat Devta* in the month of June. The Devta is offered prasad made from "*Kuttu ka aata*" (buckwheat). One particular offering is called a "*chyunchu*", a conical-shaped prasad prepared from buckwheat. The entire ritual of offering to God is performed with the left hand as it is believed that there is no right hand left with *Parvat Devta* and it is still bleeding.

This account mentioned in ABP Ganga matches what respondent Mr. Uday Singh Rawat answers. Mr. Rawat explains similar rituals whereby villagers do not put red flags atop. In fact, villagers refrain from wearing red clothes.

The reports by ABP Ganga (2020), by Pushkar Chaudhary (2018) in Zee News Hindi and by Nitimana.com website in its article "Dronagiri and Lord Hanuman" mention that when searching for *Sanjeevani*, Lord Hanuman became perplexed and turned to look around the village. He inquired about the life-saving plant from an elderly resident of the community. She pointed towards the mountain. After flying to the mountain in search of the life-saving medicine, Hanuman made the decision to climb the mountain. After that, the villagers expelled the elderly woman from society because they were so furious. According to belief, the elderly lady's error is still hurting this village. So, when prayers are offered to the mountain god *Parvat Devta*, men are not given meals by women on that day.

According to the interview respondent, Hema Rawat, this practise does not imply that women hold a lesser status in the hamlet. She claims that village daughters are referred to as "*Dhiyani*." This word has a connection to Nanda Devi. The second-highest mountain in India, Nanda Devi, is revered as Ma Nanda's home. Ma Nanda is a form of Devi Parvati. So, in a Bhotia family, women play an important role in carrying out social and familial responsibilities. They are given the highest respect.

Harish Bisht (2014) in his report for Nai Duniya mentions that in its Ramleela, Dronagiri village does not celebrate Lord Hanuman. The Ramleela makes no mention of Lord Hanuman. Featuring him might incur *Parvat Devta*'s anger. He does, however, make clear how important it is for Bhotia people to respect nature. Therefore, nothing can be given priority in such a situation that does not align with the sustainable use of environmental resources. They had a strong ecological sensibility, but Lord Hanuman did absorb a lot of their resources in a hurry. As a result, this ceremony has been performed since the beginning of time.

Respondent Harak Singh Rawat mentions that Dronagiri and most other villages in Niti valley have lot of their rituals in line with the sustainable uses of natural resources. Nature is the reason that there are various local deities in the region. From Animal Husbandry to the traditional costumes Bhotia people would first think about the nature. Respondent Uday Singh Rawat would go on explaining that most Bhotia people wear black cloth as it would easily merge with any color in the background. Therefore, not irritating the mother nature. He would mention that not wearing bright colour clothes in our region has lot to do with respecting the environment. It is this hard belief coupled with the belief of Lord Hanuman taking the mountain has become a ritual for ages in the village.

Respondent Balam Singh also mentions that the nearby village of Jelam has an important Ramayana significance. The term Jelam is derived from the Hindi word Janam. It is believed that Maa Sita was born in the village of Jelam. Every year, Jelam village witnesses a grand celebration of a fair called *Sitaun*, where performers enact the birth of Maa Sita by wearing various types of masks.

Irrespective of the rituals, the respondents do concede that most Bhotia people in the Niti valley consider themselves descendants of Lord Ram. Noted journalist of Uttarakhand Jay Singh Rawat (2010), in his book "*Uttarakhand Janjatiyon ka Itihas*", also affirms that, according to some historians, Bhotia people have been described as the successors of Lord Ram.

Conclusion: The interviews and analyses of the reports that are available on news websites make it quite clear that most of the coverage did not provide any cultural context. The practise of not worshipping Lord Hanuman is situated within a social and ecological framework. In fact, numerous sources have decontextualised the entirety of the beliefs surrounding the village of Dronagiri and Lord Hanuman. They have proposed Lord Hanuman and the Dronagiri people as mutually exclusive binaries. The Dronagiri village has gained a lot of popularity as a result, too. However, the respondents said that after visiting and speaking with the locals in the village, outsiders would have a more accurate understanding of their views on Lord Hanuman. They hoped that their community would not simply be depicted as one that does not worship Lord Hanuman. The respondents believed that Lord Hanuman would alleviate their worries and make their village prosper.

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