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Investigating the (mis) Link between the Godlings and Matrix of Hill Society of Himachal Pradesh with Special Reference to Status of Hill Women

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Abstract:

Hinduism, as a religion with innumerable gods and goddess has always attracted academicians from all over the globe to carry out a critical study of Hindu rituals, customs and traditions. However, the institution of personified godlings of upper Himachal Pradesh India remained mostly secluded from such studies as this land of godlings has largely been a cluster of closed societies on account of their geographical isolation and conservative outlook of the natives. The present paper is an exploration of various hills rituals, customs and traditions which determine the socio-cultural matrix of this society. An attempt has been made to show how new generation is now revolting against various religious taboos, specifically those imposed on women, which are degrading and absolutely non-negotiable. But such revolts are hushed by their elders who believe that something unfortunate might happen if institution of godlings is questioned. The paper argues that in the wake of interdisciplinary debates on issues such as human rights, gender issues, animal rights, health issues, scientific temperament and superstitions etc., the societies existing in the hilly terrains of Himachal Pradesh, India, must also investigate the link between religion and culture so as to ascertain the role of godlings as being reformatory or degenerative in shaping the culture of these societies. Thus the paper concludes that the rituals, customs and traditions associated with the institution of godlings need much required analysis and philosophical critique of their foundation and structure so that path be paved for a favourable social change.

Keywords: godling, gur, religion, ritual, faith, ideology, culture, impurity

The people in the whole world are awakening to the new dawn of modernization and rationality but the age old practices have become so deep rooted in the sub consciousness of people in the remote areas of upper Himachal Pradesh, India that nothing less than a rigorous shake from their deep slumbers would do to wake them up and to uproot the myths that they so dearly fathom. Extensive profound studies have always been carried out on the crucial relation between religion and society in every corner of the globe. But the institution of godlings of upper Himachal Pradesh, India, remained mostly secluded from such studies as the land of the godlings (devbhoomi) has largely been a cluster of closed societies on account of their geographical isolation and the conservative outlook of people. Nonetheless, just like every other society in the world, the societies existing in the hilly terrains of Himachal Pradesh must also critically analyse the matrix of their societies and investigate the link between religion and culture so as to ascertain the reformatory and degenerative roles of religious institutions. Thus it becomes imperative to get acquainted with and understand the institution of godlings . Such a study can lead a long way in ascertaining as to how the agency of godlings serve on one hand as a catalyst of integration and social harmony and on the other hand act as representative of old belief system, thereby, serving a blow to the concepts of modernity and scientific temperament.

1. The Web of Godlings and Gurs- An Exposition

1.1. Godlings – The Concrete Gods

The godlings of the natives of upper Himachal Pradesh are considered as the representatives of God on earth and seen as a bridge between the God and the people. They are the concrete personification of human forms who influence at length each and every single domain of the social set up and community life of the natives. It is believed here that if there is a god, I must be able to see him, to touch him, to feel him, to complain to him, and ask him about solutions to my problems and be able to pray to him and thank him. God must have an individual personality and be able to interact with me. This sums the native thinking of a simple, pure and an honest common man which finds its true pragmatic expression in the culture of naive pure hearted natives of village folks of upper Himachal Pradesh. This ideology is supported by what Hume wrote in 'Natural History of the Religions': There is a universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves.....The unknown causes which continually employ their

thoughts, appearing always in the same aspects, are all apprehended to be of the same kind of species. Nor is it long before we ascribe to them thought and reason and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men.¹ Thus, man is busy in making gods in his own image. We interpret all things on the analogy of our own nature and posit wills behind physical phenomena. In moments of deep religious feeling, when man is delivered from some imminent peril, or realises his utter dependence on the mighty forces of nature, he feels the reality of the presence of God. Gods are.²

True to above lines of thinking, the natives have unflinching and unwavering faith in the cosmos of godlings which is their common reality. Most of the godlings here are of the form of the Shiva (snake god) here. The Gods of Himachal Pradesh are taken to be the manifestations of lord Shiva, Nag, Vishnu, and *Durga* who posses both mundane and spiritual facets, with a higher stress on their former aspect.

1.1.1. Physical Appearance and Traits of Godlings

These concrete personified godlings have physical attributes like humans. They have facial features and hair. Images of godlings are made of gold, silver, bronze or brass metals and their heads are covered with hair of yak. The numbers of images or masks may vary from one deity to another. Sometimes the head of the palanquin is also covered with gold or silver *chhatras*. Deities are decorated with colourful costumes and ornaments, are tied to special kind of flexible sticks and carried around in the village or to far off places on the shoulders by the devotees. It is believed by the natives that the godling decides the direction in which he wishes to go and guides his carriers towards it. He dances and sometimes moves so vigorously that the devotees carrying him lose the control on the wooden palanquins and get dragged.

Each village has its own presiding deity who guides the life of the people and participates in their events of happiness and mourning. On occasions of festivals, they too express their happiness, solidarity and integral bond with the natives by singing and dancing with them. A study of Kullu valley reveals: Kullu is a valley of gods and goddess. These gods are alive just like you and me. They sleep, wake up, eat, dance and enjoy the beauty of nature like everyone else. Not just this, they also have their relatives and near ones who join in the celebrations. Some of these deities and godlings do not like to travel while others like to visit far away gods and goddess and move in a caravan with a medium, musicians and followers.³ Besides this, consequent on an unfortunate death or untoward incident in his domain, he very often visits the family and provides solace to the family. People share very intimate relationship with godlings and even reserve the rights of questioning their godlings and of seeking justifications for certain acts. People on special occasions invite Him to their houses to be a part of the festivities to which godling very happily obliges. He is also remembered during difficult times and godling fully justifies his role as a protector – answering the queries, offering solutions and making oracles. Ardent faith of natives translated in such a form of intimate bond with their godlings proves distinctly that he enjoys gross sentimental affinity with his people. The way the godling interacts with others also resembles with human behaviour of interaction. Godlings have an interesting way of responding to the queries of the people which can be understood by interpreting their body language. The deity reciprocates the prayers of a devotee by bending towards him. Various queries related to personal, social, psychological and financial problems are put forth before the inerrant deity with immense faith. He makes some physical gestures to answer the queries. If he bends forwards, it means reply is in affirmative while on the contrary, bending backward means an answer in negative. However, if the deity wishes to speak to natives, it has to be done through ‘Gur’ – the medium chosen by the godlings.

1.1.2. Godlings as the Focal Point of Social Organisation

Godlings are the focal point of social organisation here around which all kinds of activities of the society revolve. Godlings are irrefutably taken to be the administrators, judges and the gods at the local level. He not only looks after the law and order in the area, but is also responsible for the distribution of justice and carrying out of all kinds of ritualistic ceremonies. It would not be an exaggeration to maintain that once the institution of godlings was the only form of the government in the mountainous region of upper Himachal Pradesh. As a matter of fact, the institution of godlings can be accredited in full for providing a social system to the rural clusters in hilly terrains in the past. Even today, the local deities control and regulate all kinds of human activities and interactions operative in the specific cluster of villages which come under their dominion.

Deities are consulted for community issues. Issues could be the construction of the new temple, asking the deity for rain or respite from it or auspicious dates for undertaking agricultural activities like sowing, harvesting or any other problem. Deities are invited even to settle the disputes related with the fixing of the boundaries of agricultural land. Godling hears the plea of both the grieving parties and issues his judgement by physically fixing the boundaries. He marks the land by physically moving (on the shoulders of his devotees) on the strips of land where he wishes to fix the limits of the boundaries. The judgement thus passed, is accepted by both the parties. This practice speaks loudly of the faith of the natives in their local deity wherein they do not raise an eyebrow on his judgement even on extremely significant issues involving property matters and mundane possessions. Gurs (the chosen medium) also try to settle various disputes between two villages. The locals discuss the issue with the deities through the gurs. The deities offer the solutions through the gurs which are hotly debated. Finally deities mandate is accepted willingly and gracefully.

No social, religious or cultural rituals and rites are considered complete, or for that matter even initiated without the wish and command of the deities. It is customary that people take due permission of the deity and pay their reverence to the deity before the initiation of an auspicious task. People conduct their lives in accordance with the guidelines dictated by the deity and consult the deity for every decision pertaining to their lives. For instance, it is customary in most of the areas to offer prayers to local deity and seek his permission for the wedding. In some rare cases, sometimes the deity even refuses to give permission as he thinks that couple to be wed is a mismatch or that the wedding might face some serious problems. If godling permits the wedding, the priest has to be consulted for the auspicious date and time for the wedding. After the solemnisation of wedding, the newlywed couple

visits the local temple to get blessings of the godlings. Thereafter all the events in their lives will be directly or indirectly regulated and influenced by godlings. They will have to fulfil the obligations due to him and remember him in their times of pain and pleasure. In some villages of Chuara in Chirgaon area, the bride and groom are taken to the local deity and he proclaims them to be husband and wife. The faith in the deity is so deep, entrusting and unwavering that such a form of marriage is considered to be a very divine one with no need for any kind of formal rituals and rites. People are psychologically satisfied and uphold their godlings in supreme moral and divine light.

Possessor of magical powers, bestower of blessings, godlings are believed to have access to the other skies also or in other words – the heavens. The connection of the godlings with heavens assigns them some transcendental value too when mostly they are comprehended mostly as mundane part of rural pragmatic life. In the month of January every year, on the occasion of Makar Sakranti, an elaborate religious ceremony is held. People from the entire cluster of villages assemble for this religious ceremony. It is believed that after this day, godlings go to heaven for paying obeisance to the gods. They return after an interval of one month and then they make oracles about the whole year pertaining to various subjects of weather, crop and general well being of people etc. People assemble in large number for hearing these oracles. During the absence of the village god, no auspicious work is under taken by the villagers and the whole habitat bears a deserted look without any noise or sounds of a drum. During this interval, the people like to stay indoors especially after sunset as it is feared that evil spirits haunt the habitats in the absence of the presiding deities. The godlings of natives of mountainous region are revered more due to their fear and awe. The religion of natives of hills is also a religion of magic, which relies on charms, witchcrafts and worship of spirits which are dissatisfied. In their present day traditions and usages, we can still find the traces of primitive ideology. The worship of snake gods, belief in ghosts, dissatisfied spirits, witchcrafts, charms and magic characterise to this day many a native societies of upper Himachal Pradesh. The primary cause for such ideology to be still vibrant and alive in this area is the isolation of this area from the rest of the world which is marching on.

Deities also order solutions ranging from appeasing weather Gods, prophesising future events or conducting certain magical religious ceremonies. When in trouble, people remember their local deity and keep aside a few coins in his name which must be offered to him once the turbulent times are over. An ailing person is made to touch a few coins which likewise are offered to the godlings afterwards. For instance, a woman who is in the process of delivering baby also follows this practice with faith and reverence. This is a common practice even amongst the most educated elites of the area. In some of the very remote areas of Himachal Pradesh, there still exist pockets where rural folks believe that the so called magical medical treatment given by godlings is sufficient, and no treatment in modern day medical terms are required. Plenty of such cases are also observed wherein people consult both the godlings and a doctor for treatment of their ailments as they fully understand the inevitable essentiality of medical treatment. In some cases, for ailments like jaundice etc., people go to gurs of godlings to get some traditional treatment from them.

In order to maintain stability and to enforce law and order in the society, godling acts as a regulatory agent. He punishes, by his supernatural powers, those who get involved in unwanted activities like thefts etc. or who evade their commands and thereby endanger the law and order situation in the area. These unlawful citizens have to bear the brunt and wrath of godlings in the form of several kinds of doshas. Doshas are primarily the physical and mental ailments or disabilities inflicted on the criminal by the godlings. People keep a careful vigil over their behaviour in order to avoid the wrath of their godlings. Criticism of or discussions on godlings is discouraged by the elders lest his wrath might be infested in terms of infliction of bad luck, loss of money, disease or even death. The people have a firm almost a blind belief in their village deities besides faith in the traditional gods of the Hindu pantheon. They have retained their original forms of worship of the 'gram devta' whether he is divine, a hero or otherwise. This godling is the source of fear and inspiration for all village folk who congregate at his temple for common worship.⁴

The agency of godlings is thus considered as possessing high pragmatic influence. No doubt, an arrangement of godlings acting as administrators who distribute justice too, has proved to be a very competent, efficient, a very low cost and easily available pragmatic arrangement of administration at the very door step of hill native. It not only provides speedy justice, but is generally accepted and preferred by many in the area as it means freedom from the hassle of standing in the long queues, waiting for the dispersal of justice from ever – busy courtrooms which are overburdened with seemingly never ending stocks of ever piling cases. Thus, the pragmatic utility and significance of the institution of godlings in the less developed, isolated hill societies have far reaching implications and influences which can hardly be explained fully through reason. However, the psyche behind these acts shows how deep rooted is the faith in godlings in the minds of village folks, how people believe that godlings are omnipotent and would protect them from all kinds of pains and sufferings. But is this not true in the case of every religious person! Himachal or not, wouldn't a theist in any corner of the world pray to his God for his well being! People all around the world opine that remembering Almighty and praying to Him does not hurt. It only nurtures our soul with love, faith and trust. It is generally believed that faith can move mountains and so it might be for theists if they believe that way. However, an eyebrow is justifiably raised when this seemingly settled and non controversial issue is threatened by an ideology expressing extreme blind faith. These godlings may be highly judicious and able administrators, yet the blind faith of natives in their efficiency and supremacy shows the real image of our society which seems highly disapproving. Have the guardians of our nation failed in word and in spirit to provide timely justice, and a sound administrative and legal set up to this part of the remote forsaken hills? Is it justified on our part to feel relieved by not claiming the burden of initiating a process of progress and development and by letting native people affirm the supremacy of godlings in these matters to the extent of blind faith?

1.1.3. Godlings and Ritual of Animal Sacrifice

The religion of the underdeveloped man, the world over, has been a kind of Anthropomorphism. We cannot acquiesce in the chaos of the physical world. We try to understand it in some way and arrive at some theory of life with the conviction that some hypothesis is better than none. Naturally we project our own volitional agency and explain phenomena by their spiritual causes.⁵

Such Anthropomorphism is found in its most pronounced form in the religion of hill natives where godlings are not only believed in; rather they are also attributed with limbs and figures of men. They are assigned personalities. The world of hill natives is peopled with godlings possessed of not only supernatural strengths but also human weaknesses, possessed of the human sense of justice and capable of being influenced by the human qualities of hate and love. They feast and dance, eat and rejoice. They are easily pleased by flattery. They ask for offerings. In return of these offerings, it is expected that the godlings would protect them from all kinds of upcoming mishaps or unfavourable and unpleasant circumstances. The natives feel safe and thus mentally relieved after making the offerings. Thus it was inevitable that the offerings of animal sacrifice should come. Also, gradually having conceived the Gods as humans, much too human, the people thought that full meal was the best way to the heart of Gods.⁶ The seeds of the emergence of the rite of animal sacrifice can be seen in Vedic thought. In hills, the sacrifice consists of prayer accompanied by the sprinkling of water on goat, followed by offering of blood to godlings. The sacrificed goat is eaten by the people as banquet. Following account describes the scene of an animal sacrifice very lucidly: Jagras or vigils are held in connection with the temples, incense is burnt sheep and goats are offered in sacrifice. The Pujara gets the head and the chela the shoulder, while the lower caste musicians are given the entrails and cooked food. The rest of the animal is taken away and consumed by the offerer. The rites of worship are similar at both nag and devi temples. Blood sacrifice holds the foremost place. On an ordinary occasion, incense is burned and circumambulation of the chela within the verandah is performed by the priest. The sounding of the conch shells, ringing of the bells are accompanied by the beating of drums. The god or goddess is supposed to speak through the chela that is believed to become inspired by the deity. At the door of the temple, he inhales the fumes from the vessel held before him, while he is fanned by a man standing near him. The drums are beaten furiously, soon he begins to quiver and tremble. This is believed to become inspired by the deity. Continuing to work himself into frenzy, he springs to his feet and dances madly, scourging himself all the time with such severity as to draw blood. A goat is presented to god and water sprinkled upon it. As the animal shakes off water from the body it is supposed that the offer has been accepted.⁷ However, there is a rise of general awareness amongst the natives of some areas now that a true compassionate religion must care for all life forms. Given this basic characteristic of a real religion, animal sacrifice for instance must logically become fundamentally unacceptable. The High court of Himachal Pradesh took a much required step in this direction recently. On 1st September, 2014, the HP High Court passed a judgement banning the animal sacrifice in the name of religion in Himachal Pradesh. All the administrative authorities have been instructed to implement this ruling of the court with full force. However, some so-called guardians of religion refused to abide by the judgement of the court. In the district of Kullu, the conservative segment of the society made it clear that it is not in the power of judges, rather it must be in the power of godlings to decide for or against the ritual of animal sacrifice. They decided to move the Supreme Court on the dictate of godlings and threatened the judges of High Court that within six months they would get punished by the supernatural powers of godlings. A very prime goddess Hidimba devi refused to participate in a very significant festival known as Kullu Dusherra if animal sacrifice was not made and noone could even think of commencement of the festival without her presence. The natives were adamant on continuing with the practice of animal sacrifice. The strife between the law and the godlings could be clearly seen. However, the positive sign came from Hidimba Devi herself when on 6th October 2014 she proposed through her medium to take the offering of a coconut in place of goat. Thus a step was taken by the Court which helped in breaking an inhumane custom which was more than three centuries old. But what is unfortunate is that people stood against the verdict of the Court and bowed their head for the same judgement when it came from a divine power. However, as an aware and moral citizen of the state, it becomes our first and foremost duty to ensure that this spark for positive transformation does not die at any cost. The desire for transformation is inherently present in the progressive and ethical citizens of the state. A change in ideology is being witnessed even in hill natives now. I would like to narrate to readers a very interesting real fact. Recently in the month of May 2014, a big extravagant event was organised for the inauguration and purification of newly constructed temple at village Tikker in Rohru tehsil which became exemplary in this direction. It is customary in such ceremonies to hold a rite known as shikha puja before dawn for the purification. Villagers move around the temple in a chain before dawn which is known as 'shikhapher'. It is customary to offer sacrifice of goat and sheep to goddess Kali on the temple top. Since times immemorial, in Hindu mythology, Kali is venerated as the creator, the preserver and the destroyer of the universe. She symbolises infinite power and infinite bliss. She receives offering of blood of animals sacrificed to her as goddess of life and death, as it is believed that without death, there can be no renewal. However, deviating from the customs, the local godling known as Narain devta refused to offer animal sacrifice to Kali on his temple top. Two other godlings – Rudra and Golinag, who were also invited for the event refused to grace the occasion if the sacrifices were not offered and also warned that such an event would invite their wrath and would never be a success. But the Narain godling stuck to his revolutionary decision. The event turned out to be a great success. Such examples of setting new trends by challenging the outdated conservative traditions can go a long way in changing the mindset of the people. In many areas of upper Himachal Pradesh the ritual of animal sacrifice has been replaced by the ritual of offering coconut to godlings. Coconut broken at the threshold of the temple symbolises the animal sacrifices. People now realize that stagnation in traditions consequently result in the death of the values.

1.2. Gur – The Chosen Medium

'Gur' is a medium – a myth keeper. It is believed that *gurs* are chosen by the deities themselves. 'Gur' is believed to be blessed with the power of communing with the godling. He goes in a state of trance and gets possessed by the godling himself. The scenes of gur going in trance and communing with the godling make the natives emotional and thus believers. The gur invokes the deity by chanting some mantras and thereby goes into divine possession. The locals believe that the god then speaks to them through gur. People, for some physical or mental ailments, consult godlings. These consulting sessions are very intriguing as these sessions provide a rare chance of experiencing a clear communication between a supernatural power and a common man through

the intervention of a gur. In these sessions, godlings reassures natives of its protection and blessings, but at the same time shows his annoyance, questions their faith in him and commands them to restore faith in him.

Deities often insist on repeated visits to ensure endurance of faith. Sometimes the gur invites the will of the divine through magical religious practices. The oracle or the gur replies to the questions on behalf of the deity and in order to establish that his assertion was correct; sometimes he gives some mustard seeds or grains to the selected votaries for verification. The persons from the audience, after receiving mustard seeds or grains, count the same to find out whether the number was odd or even. In case of the number of grains being odd it is believed that the astrological finding is correct and if the number is found to be even, the gur is not believed to be true in his calculation. In that case, the oracle has to repeat the process again, till it is found that the grains distributed to most of the persons are odd in number. In case the grains given to a person are more than thirteen in number, these are treated to be invalid. Through a very simple method, people have faith in what is told by the oracle and village feuds are settled without going to the courts of law.⁸

2. Godling centric Ideology of Hills and Status of Women

The present paper proposes to analyse the role of godlings and the religious ideology of these hills in order to determine the status of woman in this culture.

2.1. The Social Status of Hill Woman

It would be really desirable to provide the readers with an exposition of how women enjoy almost an equitable social status as men. In some hill communities situated in Kinnaur and Spiti, at the time of betrothal or wedding there is still found a practice of offering a silver coin or some amount of money to the bride's family. There are numerous other instances too where the financial burden of wedding is borne solely by the family of bridegroom. There is another interesting form of marriage prevalent in Himachal Pradesh known as "gaddar" which aims primarily at reducing the wedding expenses of bride's family. In this form of marriage, a small group of relatives from grooms' side go to bride's house a day before the wedding. The bride is seen off with them from groom's house, escorted by a small group of her relatives. All the rites and rituals of marriage are performed at grooms' house which is attended by villagers and the relatives. This simply means easing the financial burden of the bride's parents. After two – three days the newlywed couple with few relatives visit bride's house. This ceremony is known as 'danoj' This may be one of the factors accounting for the mindset of natives here that a daughter's birth is not seen as an inauspicious occasion which brings with it loads of worries and apprehensions.

The local deity has special affection for the daughters of his region. It is customary in the area that the local deity dedicates special night called 'Jayee ki Jatar' (fair for the unmarried girls) of this region. He comes out of the temple, visits natives, and spends night with them. The food is cooked by the girls for the whole team comprising of priests and gurs etc. The girls and other village folks lit fire till late in the night and dance around it till late in the night. This is a special gesture of godlings to make the girls of the village feel special, good and blessed, and also a way to establish personal bonds with them. The fact that this hill state is an egalitarian society is further proved by the fact that women participate in the decision making process and enjoy full liberty. She is free to express her opinion and to take decisions in matters relating to familial and financial issues. After all, even when she is not employed, she still earns as she toils in the fields sometimes even harder than her counterpart.⁹

She has all the reasons to boost of her economic independence too. Her effort and labour is given due recognition which reflects in the manner the women are given equal social status and liberty. On the occasion of special festivities like weddings etc, the food for the gathering is prepared by the males and females are provided with ample time for gossiping and entertaining themselves. The utensils afterwards are, however, washed by females. This practice came into existence because earlier there were no catering facilities available given the difficult rough terrains of hills. Now, few wedding palaces have opened up in some of the areas, giving people options to make all arrangements of weddings in those palaces. Yet looking at the rush during the wedding season and non availability of the wedding palaces, people prefer to make arrangements at their homes. Moreover, it is the dream of every individual living in hills to make a big beautiful house. So, those who succeed in building one prefer to make wedding arrangements at their homes. Since the tough terrain makes it difficult for catering services to reach there, so the practice of community males getting together for cooking is still very much in vogue. For washing utensils, however, mostly the labour class is hired and disposable plates and glasses etc are used which means even lesser burden on women. Moreover, women are neither enslaved by social evils such as purdah system or child marriage etc, nor are they restricted from participating in any social events such as local fairs and festivals etc.

2.2. The Religious Status of Hill Women

Regardless of the fact that even the most tribal culture of the hill provides full social, political and economic liberty to the women, there is a darker side to the rosy picture of this local native culture too. The discriminatory behaviour based on notions of relative purity has had an unfortunate effect on the lives of Hindu women since very ancient times. They were considered extremely impure during times of menstruation and child birth and were equated with 'untouchables' on the ladder of social hierarchy. Harold. G. Coward, in his book 'Hindu Ethics' has elucidated how the position of women deteriorated during the smriti or epic age. He urges to sample the Mahabharata and the laws of Manu for ideas relating to purity and the body. In the Mahabharata, a son is a man's own body; while daughter is his bitterest woe. Daughters can attain happiness in heaven only through their sons. A young girl is portrayed as filled with shame on experiencing her first menstrual flow. The laws of Manu strongly reinforce this negative view of menstruation. According to Manu, a menstruating woman is unclean and her presence leaves a noxious stain.

The Mahabharata xiii 127.13 even suggests that should a menstruating woman look at an object, the gods will not take it in sacrifice. Nor can she be in the neighbourhood of the ancestral offering or the forefathers will be unappeased for thirteen years. If

a menstruating woman looks at some food, it is unclean and fit only for the demons. The uncleanness associated with the uterus is carried over into the process of conception. According to Mahabharata xii 213.3 ff conception is brought about by seed and blood, is moist with excrement and water, and fouled with the products of blood. These are the constituents of the web of *samsara* or rebirth which desire and the bodies of women spin out. Indeed the very term *rajas* seem to be used in the epic both for menstrual blood and for desire. The act of intercourse itself is also described by the Mahabharata as unclean. Not surprisingly, the sojourn in the mother's womb is seen as nauseating and gruesome and is described in Mahabharata xii 215.7 as hell's pit (*narakagarta*).¹⁰ The unfortunate influence of such an exploitative ideology can be seen in the culture of hill people though not in a very extreme form. Though the culture of this hill state might have a hundred merits, yet these do not turn even a slightest demerit into a positive one. Thus, there is definitely a need to identify the demerits and to make efforts to eliminate them from the face of this culture. Earlier, in some areas of upper Himachal Pradesh women were kept in cowsheds and were not allowed to enter the house during the days of menstruation. Though, the restrictions have relaxed to a great degree and women can move freely around the house now, yet the restrictions regarding entering the area of kitchen still prevail in some areas. It is essential for all the women to take bath everyday starting from the first day to the last day of the menstruation which is no doubt necessary from the hygiene point of view also. But the ideology plays its vital role when this practice becomes a tradition and women are restricted to step inside the kitchen without taking bath because they are impure and polluted during these days and cannot enter the kitchen which is a holy place according to the villagers. However the practice of people hailing from such rural areas but now settled in towns or cities have undergone drastic changes. Women do enter the kitchen without taking a bath, but when they visit their rural places, they follow the practices as dictated by their elders. In some most interior rural areas, unmarried girls and married ladies who are not blessed with children yet are altogether forbidden to enter the kitchen. They get the food in their room and are not allowed to touch here and there in the house. However, once they become mothers, they are allowed to enter the kitchen after taking bath. But it is again essential for all women to clean the kitchen, their room, every nook and corner of the house where they touched during those days, and wash their bedding on the last day of their menstruation. It is ironical that these practices have become so deep rooted in the psyche of the women that the main resistance for transition is found primarily from the women folk. The older women refuse to deviate from these traditions and do not let even younger women violate the same.

Another restriction imposed on women during these days is that they are forbidden to share bed with their husbands as it is believed that doing so would bring bad luck to their husbands. But again a shift in the paradigm can be very well seen. Women often gossip about this practice and narrate to each other as how an understanding has been reached between their husbands and themselves wherein they share the bed behind the locked doors. They realize that in acute winters, it can be a very difficult task to arrange a separate cosy bed during these days. This is one of the pragmatic factors which has attributed to the breakdown or a major shift in the custom. But seen from the perspective of ideology, people somewhere understand that these are not the commandments of godlings, rather these practices were coined long back by handful of people. Moreover, now with an increase in the number of employed women, reduction of the size of families to nuclear where only one woman is burdened with all the domestic chores and it is practically impossible to follow the old practices in their crude form. Neither do they have time nor the kind of energy to follow those elaborate practices. Moreover, a modern woman fully understands the vitality of hygiene during those days and with the kind of sophisticated napkins that they use, it has become easy to maintain the cleanliness. People have realized that it would be illogical to put unreasonable restrictions on the women. However, in the process the women have been deprived of the rest that they earlier used to get during those days. From the above account, the picture of the changing status and position of women must have become clear to a certain extent. Yet even today a large percentage of women who get easily trapped by the fear of wrath of godlings follow the conservative orthodox tradition rigidly and force even the ladies of younger generation to follow their footsteps.

Before the arrival of the child in this world, the expecting mother is put under some restraints which she accepts willingly for the well being of her unborn child. The restrictions are not very grave but simple ones. For instance, she should refrain from going to the places which are not frequented by men like forests and streams etc. as these places may be inhabited by evil spirits and might cause her harm. Her husband should not kill an animal, though they can eat meat. The mother-to-be should avoid attending funeral ceremonies and is also prohibited from having a look at or going out in solar or lunar eclipse. The child birth in earlier times happened at home but in the present scenario most of the educated families prefer to take medical help and go to hospitals. But if it is done at home, which in many a cases happens, then the customs prevalent in earlier times have to be strictly adhered to keeping in view the concept of impurity and pollution attached with the process of child birth. The mother-to-be is taken to the lowest storey of the house. Two diverse views can be presented for this custom. The first one is that this protects her from cold and high winds which seem true but equally true is the fact that some sort of sanctity is attached with the higher storey of the house. Even the scheduled castes are not allowed to go to the roof tops of the house as they are considered as polluted castes. In some tribal areas, the ancient practice of taking women to the cattle manor is still prevalent. The child birth is assisted by some experienced elderly women of the house due to the deprivation of any trained professional midwives. The stigma of caste is not attached with these experienced women. Even the women belonging to the so called 'low meanly caste' can assist child birth.

The mother has to take bath daily for at least thirty days since she is menstruating and the conservatives believe that the polluted mothers cannot even feed their babies before taking bath. Even when they are ailing, they are expected to take bath. Earlier, the women subjected to these practices accepted them without any resistance since their mindsets were so shaped from the very beginning. But in the present times, the scenario has changed and women armed with the weapons of education, waves of feminism, human rights and exposure to the world outside prefer to take precautions as suggested by medical experts. This creates a tension between the conservatives and modernists within the family resulting not only in mutual bickering and quarrels within family but also in social criticism by the community.

It is customary that a ceremony for purification of mother must be performed on eleventh to thirteenth day from the day of child birth. Till then, the mother is not allowed to enter the kitchen and no one accepts food from her hands except the low castes. Also the members of that family during this period are forbidden to enter any religious place or perform any religious rites or rituals. On the day of purification, clothes and beddings of mother are washed, house is cleaned and the whole house is sprinkled with gangajal (water of scared river 'Ganges'.) The priest performs the purification ceremony chants mantras and at the end makes a holy mixture of curd, sugar, milk, cow's urine and gangajal. Some of this mixture is sipped by the mother which is believed to purify her. This mixture is also sipped by other members of the family. Then the mother becomes free to enter the kitchen and other places of the house. In some families, it is customary that an astrologer is consulted to fix the day on which the new born can be taken out of the house.

Furthermore, another crucial issue to which attention must be drawn centres around the practice of prohibiting women from entering the temples of godlings. Women can pay their obeisance to the deity from outside the main temple. Men are allowed to enter the main door, but sometimes even they are not allowed to enter the places where godling is kept. Even girls who have not attained puberty are also forbidden from entering the temple. This is the direct violation of human rights. In many temples, which have been undertaken by the government, these restrictions have been done away with. For instance, Mahasu temple in Utrakhand allows even women to enter the main temple of upto the place where men can go. Earlier, they followed the practice that women could enter the main gate of the temple only if on that day, a goat was sacrificed. But now on the entrance of the temple, a board is hung on which it is categorically stated that everyone is allowed to enter the temple irrespective of his/her caste, creed, sex etc. and people very happily enter the temple without any fear or wrath of godlings. Even the animal sacrifice has been banned. Just a letter of permission by the government authorities has worked to put an end to the inhibitions of people. This shows that people do wish to break free of age old customary morality and accept with full appreciation alterations in the age old practices that match with modern scientific temperament, of course except the reservation of a handful of conservative people. With an awakening amongst women about their plight and rights, they themselves have started becoming effective catalysts of change. Except the few taboos mentioned above which are inappropriately attached with their biological necessities, women enjoy almost an equitable social status as men.

3. The Link between Godlings and Matrix of Hill Society – A Pragmatic and a Philosophical Critique

A sincere extensive effort has been made to bring to fore the darker side of the culture under introspection. The forms of discrimination practised against women mentioned in this paper are definitely not new to the reader. These forms differ only in their expression and degree. It is indeed a very sad situation that despite being a well identified problem and threat to the progress of our society, it still looms high on our heads and mocks us. The preamble of the Indian constitution resolved to secure to all its citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of a nation. Part 3 of the constitution entitled "Fundamental Rights" leads off with a section on "The Right to Equality." In this section, provision 15 (1) states "The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them." Provisions 15(2) goes on to elaborate that no citizen shall be subjected to any disability, limitation or restriction in terms of access to public buildings (including Hindu temples) to the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads or public resorts; or to be discriminated against in respect of employment. The two main groups in mind here are women and those of low castes. This is made clear by sections of provision 15 which allows the state to set up special conditions for the advancement of women and low caste groups without violating the requirements of equality of treatment. A provision 16 deals with untouchability which it abolishes. All these provisions directly attack the gradations of individuals and groups and its views of the body, especially the female body, as being filled with impurities.¹¹

A legitimate doubt must arise about the failure of legal provisions despite sincere efforts even on the part of agencies exercising authorities. Various religious taboos to which women of upper Himachal Pradesh are subjected on the issue of impurity as discussed earlier show how they are treated as inferior beings and their freedom is restricted. The legitimate outburst of people can now be witnessed. If women living in other parts of India and other countries enjoy full liberties and rights, why can't hill women? Is there biological set up different from those living in other areas of the world? In spite of the constitutional provisions in favour of women, the ground reality is very different. Does a sensible appeal from the so called inferior section of society will always fall on the deaf ears of guardians of religion with no positive output? Is it necessary that they be pushed to such an extreme limit that they come out on roads and in the process disrespect their relations and emotionally hurt them? And what are they really asking for? Not really a privilege but some very basic human rights which every human should have.

Such a religion which is insensitive to sentiments of some specific sections of society does not appeal to the modern man. The modern man has today started questioning the ideology operating behind many a superstitious and exploitative customs. How can religion in such a high tech age exercise such negative influence on the masses that they even ignore medical aid and submit to the magical treatments provided by gurs of godlings? A serious analysis would entail that a social will alone can translate into a positive transition. And this social will can best be generated and strengthened by religion alone. Religion can prove to be a tool of immense power to bring about harmony and peace in the society if used with caution. The guardians of religion are well aware that in an era of world being termed as 'global community', it would be a very hefty task to stop people from turning into non believers. Thus any act of questioning the old traditions is disapproved strongly by gurs of godlings as an act of loss of faith which would have to face the ferocious wrath of godlings. Such a religion unfortunately cares more for traditions than truth. However it must be kept in mind that godlings enjoy powers which we believe they possess and which we psychologically allow them to exercise over us. Godlings are divine because we believe them to be so; they are powerful because we believe them to be so. Even human sacrifice was once offered to them because we believed that they needed one. Thus it is primarily our own belief system which plays the most significant and pivotal role in shaping the customs and traditions of a culture. It can thus be logically

entailed that making alterations in our belief system is entirely in our own hands and our great responsibility too. Moreover, changing certain customs and religious rituals in order to make them more humane and also bringing them closer to the scientific temperament in no way means loss of faith in godlings or in religion. The real challenge today is to prevent the so called guardians of religion from playing around with the institution of godlings and customs by moulding them to suit their own purposes. Let us not pollute the institution of godlings by overshadowing them with unreasonable and unjustified man made traditions. After all, godlings alone are the centre and axis to which the lives of simple natives of hills are so rarely and inseparably connected and which make their beautiful land – the abode of godlings (devbhoomi) or in other words, the abode of eternal peace.

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