

An Epic and Enduring Kashmiri Song : Harmukh Bar Tal Zaagaie Madano

Harmukh Bar Tal Zaagaie Madano is an epic and enduring Kashmiri song, both revered by Muslims and Pandits alike, though for different reasons. Muslims take it to be a powerful romantic song of a woman for her beloved, while Pandits take it as Parvati's love-hymn for Lord Shiva. But before we resolve that problematic situation, let's focus on its authorship.

The song is classified as a traditional popularly. That is, it has been in existence over a long stretch of time, its compositional and authorship history unknown. But because it resembles the themes and lyrical style of the legendary Habba Khatoon (1554-1609), many Kashmiris attribute it to her. She broke the long tradition of spiritual and mystic poetry of Kashmir by her romantic poetry. Her poems were grounded in the sufferings of the women in her time, especially those of love-separation and harshness of life for their gender. She was born a commoner but rose to become a queen of Kashmir by dint of her poetry, singing, and stunning beauty. She was married to Yusuf Shah Chuk (ruled 1579-1586), the last Kashmiri ruler, after a chance encounter. Her fairy tale life ended excruciatingly when her husband was imprisoned for life by the Mogul emperor Akbar through a fraudulent scheme. Yusuf Shah was invited to Delhi for a consultation with the emperor. Upon reaching there he was taken to Bengal and later moved to Biswak, in Bihar, imprisoned for the rest of his life, dying there in 1592. This opened the door for Moguls to reign in Kashmir from 1586 thru 1752, one hundred and sixty-six years. Habba Khatoon spent her last 20 years living in a hut on the banks of Jhelum river, enduring the pain of love-separation from her husband. She is forever enshrined in Kashmiri ethos as an epic poetess, who ushered a new culture of realism and romanticism in Kashmiri poetry. Also, creating in it a new style called *lol*, which is a form intense lyricism wrapping a single thought. She lived with an unyielding passion for life rather than by faith, which is what her fellow human beings lived by. Even after some four hundred years after her death, some of her songs remain quite popular in Kashmir. She has been

epitomized as the Nightingale of Kashmir.

To resolve the authorship problem of the song I sought the consultation of the two Kashmiri literature professors of Kashmir University. Their verdict was that they could not authenticate the authorship of the song to Habba Khatoon, but based on the substance and lyrical style of the song, if some people attribute it to her, they would not object. Simply put, we do not know for certain its authorship.

Different versions of the lyrics of the song are offered on internet. They differ in the inclusion of some stanzas and words. Pandits and Muslims have used some different words. For example, Muslims like the word *zaagai*, while Pandits like *prarayo*. The song is in parts difficult to understand due to the use of the old Kashmiri language. I have painstakingly scrutinized the lyrics with a Kashmiri language scholar and a Kashmiri singer. Furthermore, being a poet myself was very helpful. Translating poetry is among the most difficult works a writer can do, as you move from one language to another you lose cadence, turn of the phrase, and shades of the meanings of the words. I believe the lyrics and the English translation of the song that I am presenting here are the best available at this time.

It is a passionate love song of a still young woman's adoration of her beloved. It expresses her yearning to meet him at the gates of Harmukh mountain. Also expresses her painful separation from him, her leaving her tribe for him, her fear of losing him to other women, her arrival at the apex of her youth, her fear of getting old. The most moving line of the song is its refrain: *yee dapaham tee laagyo*. The song's epic appeal is also due to its enthralling composition, which is more or less the same in all the five versions of it I have indicated below.

Kashmiri Pandits' claim on the song is tenuous. How they think of the passionate romantic song to be a hymn on Shiva-Parvati's spiritual love is incredible. There are lines referring to the woman leaving her tribe for her lover, applying henna on

her nails, fear of her losing him to other women, the radiance of her youth, and the use of the word Wallah, a word used by Kashmiri Muslims meaning "by God," that is a swearing invoking god, which just cannot be connected to Shiva-Parvati love.

Following are the authenticated lyrics of the song. The text is in bold font, my translation is below it:

1. Harmukh bar tal zaagaie madano, yee dapham tee laagyo

I will wait at Harmukh gates for you my love, whatever you ask I will offer you

2. Shari dapham golab lagaie madano, yee dapham tee laagyo

Ask for a flower on your forehead, I will offer you a rose my love, whatever you ask I will offer you

3. Phambas te naaras mil goom, wallah mey chaie paeta dil goam

Cotton and fire have fused, by God my heart is stuck on you

4. Be ti no ye doreyar chalaie madano, yee dapham tee laagyo

I also can't take this distance between us my love, whatever you ask I will offer you

5. Kabeele drayas kranai, kiah osum diak laane

I left my tribe for good, what a destiny

6. Tabeebe ath kiah mane madano, yeh dapham tee laagayo

What can a preacher do about it my love, whatever you ask I will offer you

7. Kongas kaermai chaman, maenz ho laagaie naman

Saffron I am planting in the beds, henna I will apply on my nails

8. Mushtaq gowham kaeman madano, yee dapham tee laagayo

Whom are you yearning for my love, whatever you ask I will offer you?

9. **Yaawan miyane thazro, thazrai paethe traw nazro**

My youth is at its zenith, look at me from that level

10. **Kael waisi hangai zazur madano, yee dapham tee laagyo**

At the end the temples will wither, whatever you ask I will offer you

Note: The word “temples” refers to the two temples in the human head.

I am providing links of the song sung by five professional singers: Sunita Bhan Dhar, Qaisar Nizami, Shamima Azad, Rajinder Kachroo, and Sniti Mishra. None of them have used the full lyrics and in some renderings some words have been changed.

1. Sunita Bhan Dhar: <https://youtu.be/VoYACx3LjaA>
2. Qaisar Nizami: <https://youtu.be/123OruSqagI>
3. Shamima Dev: https://youtu.be/OQOUj86lF_s
4. Rajinder Kachroo: <https://youtu.be/y4nenAJUPQI>
5. Sniti Mishra: <https://youtu.be/3hweeYKlCBU> (needs to be copied and pasted in the browser)

A discussion on the article:

Letter from Mr. Arjun Dhar:

Dear Maharaj Kaul mahra,

Namaskar. I'm writing to you having just read your thoughtful commentary of *Harmukh Bar Tal* on Kaul's Corner. I hope you don't mind my writing to you; I noticed your email address at the bottom of the commentary.

In it, you suggest that the Kashmiri Pandit interpretation of the song is tenuous. I was wondering whether you considered that the ambiguity is deliberate. I have a few reasons for suggesting this:

First, if indeed the poem was composed by Habba Khatoon, she was a 16th-century poet, and the conversion of Kashmiris to Islam began only in the 14th

century. This means that the significance of “Harmukh”, being the abode of Lord Shiva, would not have been lost on her. (I have read another commentary suggesting that Har mokh translates to “every moment”, but my own Kashmiri is not strong enough to know how reliable that is.) Therefore, there must have been a reason behind her choice. I suggest that the reason is to create deliberate ambiguity between love for God and love for a romantic partner.

Second, the rest of the song is rife with ambiguity. There are lines which use deliberately spiritual terms, which could also be read as referring to a romantic beloved (*wallah mey chaie paeta dil goam*). There are also lines which use overtly romantic language, which can be read as metaphors: “*Kabeele drayas kranai*” (“tribe” need not refer to a literal tribe, but a metaphor for worldly attachment). The use of “*maenz ho laagaie naman*” could be a visual depiction of preparation - in the same way a bride applies *henna* on *maenzraath* in preparation for union with her husband. In “*Yaawan miyane thazro*”, “*yaawan*” might not refer to literal youth, but to immaturity, which comes with you.

Third, Kashmiri poetry, like Persian poetry, blurs the distinction between romantic love and spiritual love, quite unlike the Greco-Christian tradition. The Greco-Christian tradition distinguishes between Agape love (spiritual, pure love) and Eros love (romantic, passionate love). We, on the other hand, use words like “*madno*”: generic beloved, which can either refer to a romantic attraction, or to God. We also have a religious tradition (both Hindus and Muslims) of intoxication with God. Hindu saints and *masts* from Kashmir are known for seclusion and losing themselves in meditation on God. Sufi Islamic poetry also explicitly uses the language of intoxication in a spiritual context.

You helpfully point out in your commentary that Habba Khatoon lived her life as a romantic, breaking a mystic tradition. Would you consider that perhaps she was both? It may be that she was one of the earliest to blur the lines between the two, instead of leaving one and taking up another.

If you have the time, I would love to know what you think. If not, thank you again for your thoughtful explanation. As a young Kashmiri raised outside Kashmir, it was helpful in connecting me with my roots. I am very grateful.

With best regards,

Arjun Dhar

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My response to Mr. Arjun Dhar's letter:

Dear Dhar Sahib,

It is heartening to know how a young Kashmiri Pandit like yourself is trying to get connected with his roots, while many others like you find neither comfort nor allure in doing so.

When you are researching old history which has few clues for the particular subject of your interest, then you fall upon to that old principle that has guided human beings in difficult times: character. That is, you are lost in an information darkness,

so you are unable to find your destination of a fact-based conclusion, then you have to be guided by your character.

Since we are unable to find the authorship of the epic song Harmukh Bartal based directly and indirectly on facts, we must use our character to conclude our research, and not

be seduced by our desires for a particular conclusion.

It is quite clear that you would like the research to conclude that the song is based

on Parvati's love for Shiva. But a researcher has to be neutral.

If we go by the lyrics of the song: its images, vocabulary, structure of its sentences,

its ideas, it is clearly a romantic song expressed by a young woman for her lover.

To think that it is a religious song of devotion for God is a long stretch of imagination.

It is an intense yearning of a young woman for her boyfriend. Reading in an objective, detached, unbiased frame of mind, the song is just a love song, like many

Bollywood film songs.

If a researcher concludes that the song is a Parvati-Shiva devotional song, he has to offer his proof on the following rationale:

There exist Hindu devotional songs like this.

But no example that he may cite will be having a vocabulary like this song has.

That leads us to the theory that the original Hindu devotional song was corrupted by Kashmiri Muslims. They changed its vocabulary, images, and ideas, which reconstructed

the song to a boy-meets Bollywood song. I have heard these theorists cite words in the extant version which according to them are corruptions of the former

Hindu words. But that is not a research leading to a conclusion that the original Shaivite song

has been corrupted, just fairy-tale speculations.

You have given suggestions on how the ideas in the song could have more complex roots than that emanating from a simple reading of its lyrics, leading to the conclusion that the song is not a pure romantic song. I do not agree with that because poets do not use very complex ideas, understandings, and histories. They look for simplifications. They do not offer proofs of what they are stating. You have to take it as a faith or reject it. That is why poetry can be such a powerful distillation of thought.

But I have more sympathy for the corruption theory that over a long stretch of time Kashmiri Muslims changed the original Hindu Shiva-Parvati devotional song to a romantic song. Although, as I have already said, that theory has not been proven, but there are some points in it, which are worth considering:

1. Harmukh mountain is an object of considerable reverence in Kashmiri Pandit religious ethos, and has nothing much going for it in Kashmiri Muslim ethos.
2. Hindu version of the song has words like *prariyo*, instead of *zagiya* in the Muslim version.

Also, offering flowers to someone whom one reveres is more a Hindu gesture than a

Muslim one. There have been similar suggestions in the juxtaposition of the Hindu and

Muslim versions of the song.

I firmly believe now that Habba Khatoon did not write the song. It is because it does not bear her style.

In conclusion, what I have said earlier, character in research, as in other human activities,

matters. Without having a scholarly proof that Harmukh Bartal song as it exists today is

a corrupted version of an ancient Shiva-Parvati hymn, I take the song to be a Muslim

romantic song.

Hope one day we will meet.

Maharaj Kaul

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