



ROLE OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND BELIEFS SYSTEM IN CONSERVATION OF SACRED LAKE PRASHAR, HIMACHAL PRADESH, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Prashar lake is situated in Himachal Pradesh, named after *Parashar Rishi*, one of the seven saga of *Saptrishi*. There are numerous cultural and traditional beliefs associated with this lake play an important role in conservation of the lake. The lake water is used as “*Prasad*” (sacrament) of the God, as lake water has high medicinal property. Water from the catchment flows into the lake through many medicinal plants including *Acorus calamus L.*, which accounts for medicinal properties in water. This lake reflects a holistic interaction of human and nature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Adoration of a natural landscape is an observable fact which is being followed by the all religions, but especially observed in those areas with animist roots and a tradition of ancestor worship. The sacred landscape includes sacred forests, groves, and trees, holy springs, rivers, waterfalls, lakes, ponds and wells, sacred mountains, rocks, caves and burial sites. The natural sites are sacred, because of the myths that always evolve around them and sometime due to the admiration which inspired by indigenous people. Most of the religious buildings are built on holy land; others became sacred when a religious structure was erected.⁽¹⁾ Some landscapes are venerated because of the saints and mystics who spent time there, experienced revelations, performed miracles or are buried there. Many have religious buildings that were built on holy land; others became sacred when a religious structure was erected there. The relationship between the culture and nature is always mutual rather than competitive. Sacred landscapes are acknowledged by the traditional societies. It is a fact that the sacred landscapes have a specific importance in relation to the biodiversity conservation and management in a sustainable way.⁽²⁾ The Prashar lake is a part of the cultural and natural heritage of the people of the Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh. At the interface of human culture and nature, it can provide greater opportunities for the development of religious tourism and the visitors will get the chance to know about the cultures,

and learn about the nature. The site of Prashar lake is considered as a holy land, as it is associated with the Great *Rishi Parashar*, one of the seven saga (*Saptrishi*) of ancient India. He came here and mediated after seeing its peaceful and conducive environment for mediation.

The Himalaya is a land of numerous sacred sites. Mountains are often seen as the temple of gods. People tend to look up the heights of the mountains as source of blessings most notably, water, fertility, life and healing.⁽³⁾ Peaks in the Himalaya are served as abodes of weather deities (*Indra, Varun*), places of springs traditional *naulas, dharas* and reservoirs of waters on which mountain societies depend for their well being and existence. Himachal Pradesh, the land of gods, known as ‘*Dev Bhoomi*’ has several sacred sites sacred mountains, natural springs and lakes. One of them is a high altitude lake, the Prashar lake. This sacred site is revered by the local people. Large number of national and international tourists and pilgrims visit the site throughout the year. There is no proper record of the tourists and pilgrims visiting the site. However, according to the temple administration and by visual observations during the field visits, three to four lakh pilgrims used to visit every year. There are two major three- day annual festivals (first in the month of June; and second in September) organised at this site. During these festivals *palkies* (palanquin) of 70-80 different local deities (god) with 1,200-1,500 people through the site with their gods for these festivals (Figs.1a,1b).

In spite of these large numbers of pilgrims visiting the site, the area is still intact and without any degradation. Fishing and boating are strictly prohibited in this lake. The water of this sacred site is protected from any kind of contamination. The various legends, myths and rituals associated with this sacred lake contribute significantly to biodiversity conservation and maintain its water quality. The objective of this study is to emphasize on the myths, beliefs, traditional and indigenous knowledge followed by the local people to maintain the pristine beauty of the Prashar lake.

2. THE STUDY AREA

The Prashar lake is situated in the Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh (Latitude 31°45'30"N; longitude 77°06'04.30"E) at an altitude of 2,730 m above sea level in the western Himalaya. The lake is oval in shape with an area of 1.30 ha. In this lake, there is a circular floating island, covered with dense macrophytic vegetation, which keeps changing its position throughout the year. The sacred lake is surrounded by small mountain peaks (Fig. 2).

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The information was collected by the personal interview with open ended simple questions from different knowledgeable persons and by the visual observation. Thirty respondent was interviewed at every visit to collect the complete and relevant information, interviewer comprises of Priest, medicinal practitioners, men-women from the local area (50 years or above) and Pilgrims. The interview and field trips were conducted in different season, especially during the festivals.

4. RESULTS

Legends, beliefs and myths associated with the sacred lake

The Prashar lake has many legends and beliefs which make this lake a sacred site. One of the prominent legends is that once while *Parashar rishi* was crossing the watercourse in the boat of *Matsyagandha*, the daughter of fishermen's chieftain *Dusharaj*. He visualized during the ferry that a great person could be born now. He expressed his desire to the ferry girl *Matsyagandha* (literally means the "smell of fish"), but she demurred to the proposal. *Parashar rishi* tried to convince her that no blame would come to her and she would regain her virginity after the act and also the odour of fish from her body will be transformed to fragrance. Thereafter, she was known as *Satyavati* means pure fragrance. At last, she agreed and asks *Parashar rishi* for a boon for her father that she wants a boat like structure which always swing and her father will always feel that he is in a boat. On her wish *Parashar rishi* was created a island in between the Prashar lake which always keep floating and

moving inside lake. They were united in the middle of the watercourse. This act was unseen by another person's eyes, with the aid of a mist, created by the yogic powers of *Parashar*. *Parashar* blessed her with a son, Krishna Dwaipayana (3,267 B C) who was dark complexioned and hence may be called by name Krishna (black), and also the name Dwaipayana, meaning "island born" (*Dwaipayanakasandhivicchedenachahiya*). The child grew to adulthood in minutes and after promising his mother that he would return, whenever she had a need for him, left to study the scriptures with his father. This child was *Vyasa*, who later composed the *Mahabharata* (4-5). He later compiled the classic Vedic literature of India (*Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*). Therefore, he was called *VedVyasa*. According to temple priest, this Prashar lake which contains the island is a symbolic representation of this incidence. It may be possible that the island in the lake might have been the integral part of the river during that time, and have been cut off during the long geological period due to tectonic movement in the Himalaya. It can't not substantiate without further studies related with the core sampling of the lake. Thus, this natural site of Prashar lake is sacred and named after the great seer of Rigvedic period, *Parashar*. *Parashar* is accredited for being the author of *Vishnu Purana*. He was the grandson of *Vashista* and the father of *Ved-Vyasa*.

According to locals and caretakers of the Prashar Lake, the lake itself represents the spread of the Earth. According to the myth, and which looks real at a glance of the entire lake, it consists of 70% of water 30% of land area which actually represents the Earth (Fig. 2). The lake receives fresh water supply from the groundwater recharge and the water received from the melting of snow. This sacred site is covered with snow for a greater half of the year with the lake frozen into a vast sheet of ice. During summers, in the month of June, when this heavenly divine spot becomes rich with the impulsive action of nature, the various local deities and village folks of the adjoining areas crowd this area in large number for an annual festival. On this auspicious occasion, nature gods and folks indulge in happiness and harmony. The *Parashar rishi* temple located beside the lake is one of the most momentous and interesting example of the pure pagoda type temple. This temple was built by *Raja Ban Sen* (1301-1340 A.D.), one of the early rulers of the Mandi Kingdom. The *Parashar rishi* temple situated far away from the human habitation in the high mountainous region remains almost unattended under the care of nature.⁽⁶⁾

Religio- cultural features

Beside folklores, there are a number of religious festivals which are held in the *Parashar* temple. Every year, two main festivals are organized here- first in the month of June and the second in the month of September. The festival of September is celebrated as a *jayanti* (birthday) of *Parashar rishi*. The villagers gather to perform rituals at the lake site, and enjoy the feast together. The Prashar lake is worshipped in order to maintain peace and harmony in the villages for the forthcoming year. Different colourful idols of gods in *palkies* come from different places, and it appears as a holy meet between the local gods. The *priest* of the temple performs various rituals during that time. A strong belief prevails amongst the community that if there is no movement of the floating island in the lake, it may bring calamities and unwelcome events. So, the movement of the island is a good sign for people's wealth. There is no any instance of non movement of the island during the last five years or so. According to the temple priest incidence of non-movement was before 20 years; but no concrete evidence is available of any calamity or unwelcome events.

The movement of the island in the lake may be due to the fact that the island is made of floating macrophytes which is not attached to the bottom of the lake. The weight of the volume of water displaced by this island is more than the weight of the island itself triggers the movement of island due to circulation of lake water. Pilgrims generally places colourful flags around the lake and worship the lake by circumambulate around the lake. Most of the activities of the pilgrims during the festivals or otherwise, are very eco friendly and do not allow to disturb or degrade the integrity of the ecosystem of the Prashar Lake. The people worship the lake standing outside the periphery of the lake, as they believe that entering inside the lake will contaminate the water (Figs. 3a, 3b, 3c).

According to the old people of this area, all these rituals around the lake have been performed traditionally since time immemorial. Thousands of the local people of Mandi district and the surrounding area come here and witness the festival, thereby making this the peak time for the pilgrims to visit this Prashar lake. This festival is a major attraction for the visitors. The local people also organize various stalls selling food items, traditional handmade woollen items and various photographs of the lake. This generates income and attracts visitors for shopping. Thus, these festivals fulfill both religious and recreational purposes.

The temple has a system of communicating the instructions and commands of the *devata* to the people through a person, who is known as *Gur*. *Gur* acts as a communicator between the people and God. *Gur* gets his strength from the *devata*, without his power, he is helpless. The *Gur* communicates various instructions

related with the conservation and protection of the sacred landscape, biodiversity (plants, fish, *etc.*) and not to contaminate the lake water, after getting commands from the *devata*. If these instructions are not followed by the pilgrims, the *devata* will punish them with bad luck and ill health. Such incidences of punishment has been quoted by the temple priests. ⁽⁷⁻⁹⁾

In the upper hills, the temples are open only during certain summer months, as winter months are very cold, due to heavy snow and low temperature and it becomes very difficult to stay in that region. Therefore, the people migrate to lower region during these winter months. Mostly local villagers invite the *devata* to their home, they treat *Parashar devata* as a family member or head, they always ask for permission to start any kind of new work like house construction or any new business. People invite them to home on special festivities or any auspicious occasion and that time family organize feasts for the entire village. There are so many different occasions on which *devata* is invited, it may be the birth of a child, or the fulfilment of desired wish or any other happy moment. They also invite *devata*, when the family finds itself in trouble; they please the *devata* to bring peace and goodness for them. Generally, *devata* is invited by every villager to their home on these occasions or festivals. *Devata* is brought in the *palkie* from the temple with a group of musicians with different kinds of drums and wind instruments made up of silver, gold and other precious metals. People also dance and sing praising the *devata*. There is belief that if they will do like this, the *devata* will become happier and they get blessed by the *Devata*. It is believed that *Parashar devata* also punish people, if they break the traditional rituals of the society. Once, a lady tourist from Germany came to visit the Prashar lake in 2013. She entered inside the lake to find out the depth of the lake against the instructions of the priest. She met with an accident on her way back to Kullu (Himachal Pradesh) and lost her life. Thus, it is believed that she was punished by the *devata* for violating the traditional ritual of the society. A clear instruction of these traditional rituals of the society has been displayed at the periphery of the lake (Fig. 4). Thus, *devata* plays an important role in maintaining harmony among people. *Devata* also has his relatives in different temples. During festivals, they come and meet with each other symbolize mutual harmony and respect.

Traditional knowledge of medicinal plants

It has been the practice in the past to transmit traditional knowledge of medicinal plants orally by the indigenous people from one generation to the next. This traditional knowledge of medicinal plants is very useful and important in this modern era. ⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾ These medicinal plants provide cure to fight against the

disease, especially for those people who are staying in remote areas. But, now a day's, very few people have traditional knowledge of these medicinal plants. The practice of nature conservation has been a very ancient tradition, but practices and beliefs of ancient ethics have been changed now due to the adoption of western cultures and advancement in the medicine industry.⁽¹²⁾ Local people of this area take sacred water of the Prashar lake to their homes and use it as a *Prasad* (sacrament) as well as medicine. People have a strong belief that the water has natural power of healing and blessings of *Parashar devata* to cure the various diseases. During the present study, it was observed that the water has medicinal property due to mixing of extract of rhizome, stem and leaves of medicinal plant with lake water.

The most important medicinal plant, which is used as a traditional ayurvedic medicine is *Acoruscalamus L.* (Figs. 5a, 5b). This plant is abundantly available in the water in the periphery of the lake. This plant has great medicinal value to treat different diseases. *Acorus calamus L.* is commonly known as *Sweet flag*, *sweet sedge*, *myrtle flag*. Locally, this plant is known as "*Bare*". (*Acorus calamus* Linn.), an indigenous medicinal plant of India belongs to family *Acoraceae*. It is delineated under various therapeutical groups like '*Lekhaneeya*', '*Triptighna*', '*Arshoghna dashemani*' by Acharya Charaka⁽¹³⁾, '*pippalyadi*' and '*Vachadi*' by Acharya Sushruta⁽¹⁴⁾, '*Mustadi*' and '*Vatsakadi*' by Vagbhata⁽¹⁵⁾. The pharmacognostical characters of *Acorus calamus* are described through various synonyms like '*Shadgrantha*' (Having six nodes), '*Uragandha*' (having strong aroma), '*Lomasha*' (Having small hairs) and '*Golomi*' (Having small hairs like cow). It has important pharmacological properties like *Deepana* (appetizer), *Pachana* (digestive), *Vamaka* (emetic), *Medhya* (brain tonic), *Kanthya* (good for throat), *Sanjnasthapana* (restores lost consciousness) and *Vedanasthapana* (anodyne) and hence used extensively in therapeutics.⁽¹⁶⁾ *Acorus calamus L.*

grows mostly in the hilly region, it is a perennial plant which grows near the edge of the lake and streams. It is semi aquatic plant and its leaves are long and sword shaped, green and yellow in colour. This plant is extensively used for the treatment of –stomach ailments, mental disability, joint pain, and ache. It is also used as a brain tonic for strengthening the memory. *Acorus calamus L.* when mixed with the roots of *Polygala* makes an effective medicine for the treatment of mental and intellectual health. *Acorus calamus L.* is registered in the Pakistani Materia Medica, where roots and rhizomes both are used especially in cases of neurological disorder.^(17,18,19) There are two more very important medicinal plants which are present in the sacred landscape. There is a dictum in the this region that "*Jethi bana, bsuti, bare thethi manu kiya mare*" which means that where these three ayurvedic medicinal plants are present, nobody can die there. Which clearly reflects the medicinal values of these plants. The botanical names of these three medicinal plants are- *Vitexnegundo L.* for *Bana*, *Adhatodavasica L.* for *Basuti* and *Acoruscalamus L.* for *Bare*.⁽²⁰⁾ These plants are a boon for the treatment of most of the diseases. Beside these medicinal plants, there are several other medicinal plants, which are naturally available in this area Table 1.

Most of the, foreign tourists who visit these types of sacred sites, they develop respect for the Indian culture and this sacred landscape. Two different interactions were made at different times with two foreign tourists during the field visits. One was Ms Myra from Huston, USA and another was Skyler from Germany who came here in 2014 and 2015 respectively as a tourist and shared their experiences during the interaction. They felt peace and respect for this sacred land.

It introduces foreigners with culture and traditions of that region. Religious tourism provides jobs, income, revenue and developments.⁽¹⁾ The income generated from this kind of tourism can be used for the conservation and management of these sacred sites.



Figs. (1a) (1b)- Congregation of people at the lake during festivals with their *palkies*, 2- The scared lake Prashar, Himachal Pradesh, (3a)(3b)(3c)- People worshipping and collecting *prasad* (water) from outside of the lake periphery, 4- Displaying of instructions for conservation of the scared lake, (5a) (5b) Medicinal plant, the *Acorus calamus L.* and its rhizome.

Table 1. List of medicinal plants and their uses dwelling in the area of Prashar lake

Scientific Name	Common Name	Parts	Uses
<i>Acoruscalamus L.</i>	Sweet Flag	Leaves, stem, roots and rhizome	Old folk remedy for the treatment of arthritis, neuralgia, diarrhea, dyspepsia, hair loss and other disorders, head and stomach aches, aromatic stimulant, mild tonic, <i>etc.</i>
<i>Anemone obtusilobaL.</i>	Himalayan Thimbleweed	Roots and seeds	Bruises, fever, body pain, arthritis, anxiety
<i>Achilleamillefolium L.</i>	Common Yarrow,	Whole plant	Diaphoretic, astringent, tonic, stimulant and mild aromatic
<i>Calthapalustris L.</i>	Marsh Marigold	Whole plant	Treat colds and sores, to induce vomiting, use to remove warts and is also used in the treatment of fits and anemia

<i>Chenopodium album L.</i>	Lambsquarters, Goosefoot	Whole plant	Used in the treatment of rheumatism, bug bites, sunstroke, urinary problems, skin problems, etc. These are very nutritious, high in protein, vitamin A, calcium, phosphorus, and potassium.
<i>Pedicularisbicornuta L.</i>	Horuned Lousewort	Whole plant	Skeletal muscle relaxant
<i>Rhododendron spp.L.</i>	Rhododendron, Rose Tree, Rosebay	Flowers, petals and leaves	Antioxidant effects, dysentery, diarrhea
<i>Centellaasiatica L.</i>	Indian Pennywort	Whole plant	Treatment of anxiety and hypertension, circulation of blood in the veins and capillaries, treatment of arthritis, wound healing, colds, fevers, diarrhea, dysentery, syphilis, hepatitis, ulcers and epilepsy, gastrointestinal problems, treatment of cancer and asthma, memory power
<i>Berberisaristata</i>	Indian Barberry, Chitra	Whole plant	Swollen and sore eyes, broken bone, wounds, gonorrhoea, curing piles, unhealthy ulcer, Jaundice
<i>Daucuscarota L.</i>	Wild Carrot	Seeds	Birth control (seeds block progesterone synthesis)
<i>Clinopodiumumbrosum L.</i>	Shady Calamint	Leaves	Use for cuts and wounds
<i>Impatiens arguta L.</i>	East Himalayan Balsam	Flowers	Use to dissolve clots, promoting diuresis, abdominal pain, carbuncles, difficulty in urination
<i>RumexnepalensisL.</i>	Napal Duck	Leaves	Leaf extract applied to skin sores, leaf infusion is given in colic and applied to syphilitic ulcers.
<i>Berberistinctoria L.</i>	Nilgiri Barberry	Leaves and roots	Curing jaundice, treatment of cancer to some extent by the tribal and local people.
<i>Taraxacumofficinale L.</i>	Dandelion	Whole plant	Laxative, bile, liver problem, improving digestion, used as mosquito repellent, used as a folk remedy to treat warts.
<i>TrifoliumpratenseL.</i>	Red Clover, Purple clover	Leaves and flower,	Use as antispasmodic, various throat problem
<i>Rumexhastatus L.</i>	Arrowleaf Dock	Whole plant	Wound and cut, laxative, skin diseases
<i>Vitexnegundo L.</i>	Chaste tree	Whole plant	Cold, flu, asthma, muscular relaxant
<i>Adhatodavasica L.</i>	Malabar nut, Vasa	Whole plant	Cough, asthma, allergy, bronchial relaxant
<i>Argemone Mexicana L.</i>	Prickly Poppy	Whole plant	Asthma, analgesic, sedative, urinary problem.

5. CONCLUSION

Traditional culture and beliefs of the people are known as an important tool for the conservation and management of the sacred sites. The preservation of these traditions and beliefs is very important for the conservation of biological diversity, as both are interlinked with each other (McNeely, 2000). Till now, Prashar lake has maintained its pristine beauty. However, due to high influx of tourists, in recent years, the natural beauty of the lake may get deteriorate in coming future. So, it is necessary to regulate tourist's influx and their activities. Thus, the local administration and government should prepare some

strategy and guidelines for the protection of this sacred lake based on the traditional culture and beliefs.

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