

Faith, Innocence, and Collective Welfare: A Cultural and Symbolic Study of Supreme Sacrifice in Dogri Folk Tradition

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Abstract

Folk literature serves as the living archive of a community's cultural memory, ethical values, religious beliefs, and social practices. Long before the emergence of written literature, oral narratives functioned as vehicles for preserving collective experiences and transmitting them across generations. Among the numerous regional literary traditions of India, Dogri folklore occupies a distinguished place because of its rich representation of the customs, spirituality, and worldview of the Dogra people inhabiting the Duggar region of Jammu. Dogri folk tales are remarkable for their portrayal of courage, devotion, moral righteousness, familial affection, and harmony between human beings and nature. These narratives are not merely imaginative stories but cultural documents reflecting the socio-religious consciousness of their time. They reveal the communities understanding of life, death, justice, sacrifice, and divine intervention. This paper examines "Supreme Sacrifice," a Dogri folk tale included in Suman K. Sharma's *Tales from the Tawi: A Collection of Dogri Folk Tales*. The narrative revolves around a devastating drought, the willingness of an innocent child to sacrifice himself for the welfare of the community, and the miraculous restoration of rain. Through the perspectives of folklore studies, cultural studies, symbolism, and eco-criticism, the paper explores how the tale embodies the moral philosophy of Dogra society. It argues that the narrative transforms sacrifice into an ethical ideal rooted in compassion, collective responsibility, and divine justice. The study further demonstrates that the tale preserves indigenous ecological consciousness by presenting harmony between humanity and nature as dependent upon moral conduct rather than material power. As a representative example of Dogri oral literature, "Supreme Sacrifice" continues to communicate values of courage, faith, and social solidarity in contemporary society.

Keywords: Dogri folklore, sacrifice, cultural studies, symbolism, eco-criticism, oral tradition, Dogra culture, collective welfare..

Introduction

Folk literature functions as the living archive of a community's cultural memory, ethical values, religious beliefs, and social practices. Long before the emergence of written literature, oral narratives served as vehicles for preserving collective experience and transmitting it across generations, carrying within them a people's sense of justice, its working theology, and its picture of how a human being ought to behave toward neighbours, strangers, and the land itself. Among the numerous regional literary traditions of India, Dogri folklore occupies a distinguished place because of its rich representation of the customs, spirituality, and worldview of the Dogra people inhabiting the Duggar region of Jammu. Dogri folk tales are remarkable for their portrayal of courage, devotion, moral righteousness, familial affection, and harmony between human beings and nature. These narratives are not merely imaginative stories but cultural documents reflecting the socio-religious consciousness of their time, revealing the community's understanding of life, death, justice, sacrifice, and divine intervention. One such significant tale is "Supreme Sacrifice." Set during a period of catastrophic drought, the story presents a village suffering from famine, thirst, and despair.

Religious rituals fail to invoke rain until a holy ascetic receives a divine revelation that only the sacrifice of a living human being can restore nature's balance. While the adults hesitate to surrender their lives, a six-year-old boy voluntarily offers himself for the welfare of the entire village. He is placed in a potter's oven for fifteen days but miraculously survives unharmed, after which heavy rain begins to fall. This extraordinary conclusion elevates the tale beyond a miracle story and transforms it into a profound meditation on innocence, moral courage, faith, and collective responsibility. Scholarship on Dogri folklore has, for the most part, treated it as a resource for regional identity and preservation rather than as a body of texts warranting sustained literary analysis in its own right. Sharma's *Tales from the Tawi* remains one of the few accessible English-language collections of Dogri tales and has done much of the work of simply keeping these narratives in circulation for readers outside the Duggar region (Sharma). Within the wider field of Indian folklore studies, scholars have repeatedly pointed to courage, religious devotion, and communal justice as recurring preoccupations of regional tale traditions, and A. K. Ramanujan's work on Indian oral narrative has argued that folktales preserve systems of ethical and practical knowledge that written, elite histories tend to leave out (Ramanujan).

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Eco-critical scholarship, meanwhile, has drawn attention to the way many traditional narratives place human morality and environmental balance within a single frame, treating them as functions of one another rather than as separate domains (Glotfelty and Fromm). Despite the cultural significance of "Supreme Sacrifice," the tale itself has received almost no sustained scholarly attention, tending to appear, when it appears at all, as one story among many in general surveys of Dogri or North Indian folklore rather than as an object of study in its own right. The present paper attempts to address this gap by offering a fuller cultural and symbolic reading of the tale, drawing on folklore theory, symbolic anthropology, cultural studies, and eco-critical thought to argue that the narrative functions simultaneously as moral instruction, religious allegory, and a form of ecological thinking that remains relevant to a contemporary reader.

The drought that opens "Supreme Sacrifice" is never treated as a neutral meteorological event. From the first lines of the tale, the failure of rain is entangled with questions of collective conduct and divine attention: the village does not simply lack water, but has, in some sense the narrative does not fully spell out, fallen out of right relationship with the forces that govern its survival. This is a familiar move in agrarian folk narrative across India, where drought rarely appears as accident and almost always appears as a form of communication, nature's way of registering that something in the human order has gone wrong. What is worth noticing is how the tale resists blaming any single person for the crisis. There is no villain whose greed or cruelty has brought the drought upon the village, a significant choice, since had the story identified an individual wrongdoer, the drought would function simply as punishment and the correction would lie in removing that person. Instead, the crisis is presented as a shared condition belonging to the community as a whole, which is precisely why its resolution also has to come from the community as a whole, through the willing sacrifice of one of its own rather than the expulsion of a guilty party. This carries an ecological logic as well as a moral one: by refusing to isolate a single cause, the narrative implies that the relationship between a community and its environment is systemic rather than transactional, an ongoing, cumulative balance that can be disturbed and must be actively restored. Bascom's account of the social functions of folklore is useful here in asking what work such a story does for the community that tells it, validating certain behaviours and offering socially sanctioned release from collective anxiety (Bascom); read this way, the tale's insistence that ordinary ritual has already been exhausted before the sacrifice becomes necessary sets up the ethical test that structures everything which follows.

Voluntary self-sacrifice for the good of the collective is one of the oldest and most stable motifs in Indian narrative tradition, and "Supreme Sacrifice" belongs to a recognisable lineage that includes the story of Shunahshepa, offered as a substitute sacrifice and ultimately spared through devotion and divine intervention, and the story of King Shibi, who offers his own flesh to save a dove from a hawk. In each of these narratives, sacrifice is not something inflicted upon a passive victim; it is something claimed by the one who sacrifices, which is precisely what separates it, morally, from violence. The Dogri tale follows this pattern closely. Nothing in the narrative suggests that the boy is chosen against his will or coerced by adults looking for a convenient victim; he offers himself, and it is that willingness, more than the act of sacrifice itself, that the story treats as the true miracle.

This distinction matters because it is what allows the tale to avoid becoming a simple story about the value of a human life weighed against the value of rain. If the boy were merely selected, the narrative would be difficult to defend on any ethical ground; because he chooses, the sacrifice becomes an act of supreme moral agency rather than an act of communal violence against the weakest member of the group. A further comparison is worth drawing to the story of Puru, who exchanges his youth for his father Yayati's old age so that Yayati might continue to enjoy worldly pleasure, another narrative in which a younger figure absorbs a burden that by every ordinary logic should belong to someone older or more powerful. What all three stories share is a suspicion of self-interest and a conviction that the highest form of virtue is the voluntary absorption of another's suffering, applied here by the Dogri tale to a specifically local crisis, a village drought, so that an inherited moral grammar receives a new, regional setting.

That the hero of this narrative is a six-year-old child, and not a warrior, a king, or even an adult villager, is one of its most striking features and repays close attention. Across a great deal of Indian and broader South Asian folklore, the child occupies a special moral position: too young to have accumulated the compromises, ambitions, and self-interest that accrue to adult life, the child is treated as a figure of untainted moral clarity, and innocence functions here not simply as an absence of wrongdoing but as an active spiritual resource, a kind of purity that can do work adult virtue cannot. The tale's brief, unjudging mention of the adults' hesitation is telling; the villagers who hold back from offering themselves are not condemned for their reluctance, which is simply noted as a fact of adult life, weighed down as it is by attachments, responsibilities, and fear. Against this backdrop, the child's offer reads not as recklessness but as a moral vision the adults cannot quite reach, and the story proposes, in effect, that courage untouched by self-interest is more available to those who have not yet had time to develop self-interest in the first place. This also connects the tale to a much wider tradition, found across many cultures, in which children function as vessels of divine favour or moral truth precisely because they are considered closer to a state of grace than adults are, a reading Geertz's symbolic anthropology supports insofar as it treats culture as a system of meanings a community works out through public, shared symbols (Geertz). The child hero of "Supreme Sacrifice" is not merely brave; he is legible to the community as morally superior in a way that would be far harder to sustain were the same act performed by an adult, whose motives could always be second-guessed, and his survival in the oven functions as confirmation of what the community already suspected about childhood innocence, that it carries a protection adult virtue, compromised as it always is, cannot claim.

The image at the emotional centre of the tale, a child placed inside a potter's oven for fifteen days and emerging unharmed, draws on a symbolic vocabulary considerably older than the tale itself. Fire in Indian religious thought is rarely only destructive; in Vedic ritual, fire is the medium through which offerings are carried to the gods, a purifying and transformative element rather than simply an annihilating one, and the potter's oven sharpens this symbolism further, since the oven is precisely the place where raw, formless clay is subjected to heat and comes out the other side as something finished, durable, and useful. Read this way, the child's time in the oven is less an ordeal to be survived than a process of transformation to be undergone, structurally closer to initiation or rebirth than to execution.

The fifteen-day duration reinforces this reading, since a sacrifice concluded in an instant would emphasise the moment of danger; whereas a sacrifice stretched across a fortnight instead emphasises endurance, patience, and the sustained faith of both the child and the community that awaits him. When he emerges unharmed, the fire has not failed to do its work; it has simply done a different kind of work than destruction, confirming his innocence rather than consuming his body, and the tale's logic depends on this ambiguity, since fire tests, and what it tests here is purity, not physical resilience. The rain that follows immediately afterward completes the symbolic circuit: if fire in this tale purifies rather than destroys, then rain, arriving as its direct consequence, functions as the visible, communal reward for a private ordeal successfully passed, and the sequence of drought, fire, and rain traces a movement from scarcity through ordeal to abundance, with the child's body serving as the site where that whole transformation is worked out on behalf of everyone else.

Although the boy is the narrative's central figure, the tale does not skip past the cost his decision imposes on those who love him, and the mother's grief occupies an important, if quieter, place in the story. Her fasting and prayer during the days her son spends in the oven function as a kind of parallel ordeal, a domestic and emotional counterpart to the child's physical one; where his trial is public and communal, hers is private and sustained, and the tale seems to recognise, even without dwelling on it at length, that sacrifice is rarely borne by the person who makes it alone. The dialogue implied between mother and son, brief as it is in most tellings, matters because it keeps the sacrifice from becoming abstract, insisting that this is a real child, embedded in a real family, whose absence would be felt as a specific, personal loss and not only as a communal misfortune averted. Her endurance, waiting through fifteen days without certainty of the outcome, models a form of faith distinct from her son's: his is the faith of the one who acts, hers is the faith of the one who waits, and both are presented as forms of courage. The tale's quiet insistence on including her suggests that Dogri storytelling understands heroism as something that radiates outward from a single dramatic act to include everyone who has to live through its consequences, a reading consistent with Raymond Williams's understanding of culture as a whole way of life rather than a set of isolated artistic productions, in which even the peripheral figures of a narrative carry evidence of a community's values (Williams).

The holy ascetic who receives the initial revelation occupies a structurally important but morally limited role in the tale: he identifies the cause of the crisis and names its solution, but he does not perform the sacrifice himself, and the narrative is careful not to let him take credit for what follows. His meditation opens a channel of communication between the human and divine orders, but the actual resolution depends on the boy's action rather than on the ascetic's spiritual authority, a division of labour that keeps the tale from becoming a story about the power of religious specialists and turns it instead into a story about the moral capacity of ordinary people, including children. The rain itself functions as an unambiguous verdict. In a narrative universe where prior rituals have already failed, the arrival of rain immediately after the boy's survival cannot be read as coincidence; it is presented as divine approval, arriving in a form the entire village can witness and understand without further explanation. This matters because it makes the miracle communal rather than private: the boy's survival could, in principle, have remained a secret marvel known only to those

present at the oven, but the rain ensures that the whole community receives confirmation of what has happened, tying the private ordeal of one family to the visible fate of everyone in the village, so that justice in this tale is not an abstract principle to be argued about but a weather event everyone can feel.

Read through an eco-critical lens, "Supreme Sacrifice" resists a purely transactional view of nature, in which rain is simply owed to a community that performs the correct rituals in the correct order. Instead, the tale ties environmental restoration to an act of extraordinary moral courage, suggesting that the natural world responds to the ethical condition of the community living within it rather than to ritual technique alone, a claim meaningfully different from the idea that nature can be manipulated through the right combination of prayers and offerings. It proposes instead that nature and morality are bound together, so that an ethical failure expresses itself as ecological crisis and an ethical achievement expresses itself as ecological renewal, an idea eco-critics such as Glotfelty have worked to recover from traditional narrative around the world (Glotfelty and Fromm). This has obvious resonance for a contemporary reader thinking about climate and environmental ethics, though the tale should not be flattened into a simple allegory for modern ecological politics; what it offers instead is a much older intuition, increasingly echoed by contemporary environmental thought, that the health of a landscape and the moral condition of the people who live on it are not separate questions. The drought in the tale is not solved by irrigation, by trade, or by relocation, but by an act of communal ethical significance, so that the narrative can be read as an early, indigenous articulation of the idea that environmental crisis is inseparable from questions of value, responsibility, and collective conduct.

Beyond its moral and symbolic content, "Supreme Sacrifice" is also a document of Dogra communal life: the village setting, the presence of the potter's craft as a central image, the authority granted to the holy ascetic, and the emotional register given to the mother's grief all reflect specific features of rural Duggar society as it has understood and represented itself across generations. Tales of this kind do not simply entertain; they rehearse, for each new generation of listeners, what the community considers admirable, what it fears, and what kind of world it believes it is living in. Oral transmission itself is part of this cultural work. A tale that survives being told and retold across generations, without the fixity of a single authoritative written text, necessarily changes slightly with each telling, but its core, sacrifice, innocence, and communal restoration, persists because that core continues to matter to the people telling it. Vladimir Propp's structural approach to the folktale is helpful in identifying the underlying pattern of lack, sacrifice, and restoration that this narrative shares with a much wider body of traditional storytelling, even where "Supreme Sacrifice" compresses and reorders the functions Propp identified in the Russian wonder tale (Propp). Collections such as Sharma's *Tales from the Tawi* perform a valuable service in this respect, giving tales like "Supreme Sacrifice" a wider readership and a measure of permanence, while the oral tradition from which they are drawn continues its own, separate life in the villages of the region (Sharma), and the tale's continued circulation, in both oral and printed form, is itself evidence of the values it describes still being considered worth preserving.

Taken together, these readings point to a consistent set of conclusions. Sacrifice in the tale is presented as voluntary rather than imposed, which is what allows it to function as an ethical ideal rather than as communal violence.

Childhood innocence is treated as morally superior to adult self-interest, precisely because it has not yet been compromised by the attachments and calculations of adult life. Nature, within the logic of the narrative, responds to ethical conduct rather than to ritual technique or material power alone. Faith is dramatised as action, the boy's willingness and the mother's endurance, rather than as passive ritual observance. And the tale, in binding the moral and ecological orders together, actively promotes both social cohesion and an early form of environmental consciousness among the community that continues to tell it.

Conclusion

"Supreme Sacrifice" earns its place among the finest examples of Dogri folk literature precisely because it holds so much together in so short a space: moral philosophy, religious belief, ecological intuition, and cultural identity, all worked through a single, tightly constructed narrative. Through the extraordinary decision of a young child, the tale insists that real heroism has little to do with physical strength or social standing and everything to do with a selfless concern for the welfare of others. The child's survival, against every expectation the story has built up to that point, reinforces a folk conviction that innocence carries its own protection, and that moral integrity, sustained under pressure, outlasts fear.

Read eco-critically, the tale draws a durable connection between ethical conduct and environmental balance, treating rain not as a resource to be extracted through the correct technique but as a sign of restored moral order. In doing so, it anticipates, without needing to argue for, a way of thinking about environmental crisis that contemporary ecological criticism has had to work hard to recover from more clinical and transactional accounts of nature. That the tale reaches this position through drought, sacrifice, and rain rather than through argument is precisely what makes it worth reading as literature and not only as historical curiosity.

Taken as a whole, "Supreme Sacrifice" functions simultaneously as literature and as cultural heritage. It preserves something of how the Dogra community has understood courage, compassion, and communal responsibility, while remaining legible and moving to readers well outside the Duggar region. As one part of India's much larger, and still under-studied, regional oral tradition, it deserves more sustained attention from folklore studies, cultural studies, and comparative literature than it has so far received.

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