

Gastro-Politics and Feudal Justice: A Socio-Cultural Study of Peasant Life in “Never Shall I Touch the Hamper Again”

Preeti Sharma*,  and Faheem-ul-Haq 

¹Department of English, Government Degree College, Sunderbani, Rajouri, 185153 Jammu and Kashmir, India

²Department of English, Govt Degree College, Chenani, 182141, Jammu and Kashmir, India

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*Corresponding Author: **Preeti Sharma** | Email Address: preetisharmaju@gmail.com

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Abstract

Folk narratives that appear, on the surface, to be little more than rural comedy frequently encode, in incidental and compressed form, the material and political conditions of the society that produced them. This article examines “Never Shall I Touch the Hamper Again,” a comic Dogri folk tale anthologised in Suman K. Sharma's *Tales from the Tawi: A Collection of Dogri Folk Tales* (2007), as an instance of this phenomenon. The narrative recounts how an ageing peasant unwittingly consumes a pot of khir concealed by his wife, is consequently summoned before the raja on the pretext of curing the queen's ailment, and, through a combination of terror and accident, succeeds where the court's trained physicians had failed. This article situates the tale within the material conditions of Dogra peasant life, subsistence agriculture, gendered food distribution, and a feudatory political order in which an autocratic raja and his vairs together constitute the entire apparatus of justice and healing. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's concept of gastro-politics, the article argues that food operates in the tale not merely as sustenance but as a currency of domestic authority, and that the wife's retaliatory appeal to the raja converts a private culinary transgression into a public feudal spectacle. The article further considers the tale's comic structure, its glossed Dogri lexicon, and its closing verse-charm as evidence of an oral performance tradition that Sharma's printed English adaptation preserves even as it necessarily reframes it for a literate, national readership.

Keywords: Dogri folklore; gastro-politics; peasant life; feudal order; Jammu region; oral performance.

Introduction

Among the twenty-nine tales collected in Suman K. Sharma's *Tales from the Tawi: A Collection of Dogri Folk Tales* (2007), “Never Shall I Touch the Hamper Again” occupies a modest but instructive place. It is the third tale in the volume, following “But It Didn't Strike Us!” and “Chenas,” and Sharma himself situates it among the tales intended to illustrate the essentially comic disposition of the Dogra people, whom he describes, in his preface, as unimaginable “if they did not have a funny bone” (Sharma, Preface) [1-2]. The narrative, barely four printed pages in length, recounts how an old peasant, driven by hunger and a moment of misplaced sentiment, consumes a pot of khir that his wife had concealed for herself; how the wife, upon discovering the theft, contrives to have him summoned before the raja on the pretext that he is a healer capable of curing the queen's abscessed leg; and how the old man, terrified and improvising a nonsensical verse-charm about hampers and khir, inadvertently lances the abscess with a blade of grass and returns home rewarded, still reciting his vow never again to touch the hamper.

Considered superficially, the tale is a piece of rural comedy composed for a threshing-floor audience. Examined more closely, however, it constitutes a compact ethnographic document, encoding considerable information about the

operation of food, gender, marriage, and political authority in the Dogra hill country of Jammu prior to the levelling effects of the market economy and the modern administrative state. This article offers a socio-cultural reading of the tale that closely attends to the material world on which its comedy depends—the todah and the khir, the broken plough handle, the royal proclamation, the vairs who have already failed the queen, and the saroot grass that succeeds where they could not. Rather than importing a single external theoretical apparatus, the analysis draws selectively upon Arjun Appadurai's account of “gastro-politics” in Hindu South Asia, A. K. Ramanujan's observations on the domestic logic of women's tales, and the regional history of the Dogra hill states documented by Hutchison and Vogel, to demonstrate how a brief comic narrative may carry within it the outline of an entire social order [3].

The method adopted here is qualitative and text-centred, consistent with established practice in literary and folkloristic close reading rather than with empirical social-science methodology. The primary source is the tale as printed in *Tales from the Tawi*, collated against the digitised full-text edition held by the Internet Archive so that pagination and wording could be verified independently of a single physical copy; all in-text citations below refer to this collated text.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the tale is read against the ethnographic frame Sharma himself supplies in his preface, on the working assumption, standard in folk-narrative scholarship since Stith Thompson, that a tale's incidental details, foodstuffs, implements, forms of address, units of currency are as informative of the culture that produced it as its plot (Thompson). Second, the tale's treatment of food, gender, and authority is examined through concepts drawn from social anthropology and folklore studies, principally Appadurai's gastro-politics and Ramanujan's account of women's oral narrative strategy, applied only where the tale's own details invite such application. Third, the tale is read comparatively but narrowly, against a small number of companion tales within the same volume, rather than against the broader Aarne-Thompson-Uther tale-type index or an unrelated corpus, since the present concern is the specific regional and material world of Dogra Jammu rather than cross-cultural tale-type comparison—a limitation to comparative method that has been discussed by Dundes and, within the South Asian context specifically, by Blackburn and Narayan. Historical claims regarding the Dogra feudal and agrarian [4]. order draw upon the regional histories of Hutchison and Vogel, Charak, and Bamzai, cross-checked against one another, and are employed only to corroborate details already present in the tale rather than to supply information the tale itself does not raise.

Sharma's preface is notably candid, for what is on its cover is a children's-adjacent folklore anthology, regarding the harshness of the terrain from which these tales emerge. He describes the Duggar country as "not a very hospitable terrain," where the earth "yields its bounty, but with a considerable effort on the part of the tiller," where the monsoon "plays truant quite often," and where, within living memory, "hunger stalked at the door" (Sharma, Preface). This is not an incidental description; it is the precondition for the entire comic mechanism of "Never Shall I Touch the Hamper Again." The tale opens not with a marvel or a supernatural agent, as several of the volume's other tales do, but with a plain social fact: "the husband was a peasant. He toiled day in and day out in the fields, but all he got for his labours was bland and insipid food" (Sharma 8). The narrative economy of this opening sentence constitutes a form of historical testimony in itself: constant labour ("day in and day out"), reward that is minimal and monotonous ("bland and insipid"), and a response to this arrangement that is not rebellion but resignation, for he "took it resignedly" (8). Hutchison and Vogel's history of the Panjab hill states describes the same sub-montane tract, situated between the Ravi and the Chenab, as a region of small, dispersed holdings, precarious rainfall, and a stratified agrarian hierarchy in which the cultivator's surplus was claimed successively by landlord, moneylender, and the state's revenue demand (Hutchison and Vogel) [5]. The old peasant of the tale, whose only visible possessions are a plough, a pair of oxen, and a house so bare that it may be described in a single word, "empty" (Sharma 8), corresponds closely to this historical type.

The tale's spatial economy is equally instructive. It requires the reader to imagine little beyond a field, a house, a kitchen, a hamper, a village carpenter who repairs the broken plough, and, subsequently, a palace. This minimalism of setting constitutes its own commentary on peasant life: there is little to describe because there is correspondingly little material wealth to describe. Where the volume's more overtly religious tales, "Chenas," "Parmandal," "Mahadevi," move through temples, idols, and ceremonial processions, this tale remains confined almost entirely to two spaces: the domestic interior and the

raja's court, the two poles between which the peasant's existence is stretched. M. N. Srinivas, writing of a very different Indian village, observed that an entire social cosmos could be read from the physical arrangement of a handful of household spaces (Srinivas); a comparable dynamic operates here, on a smaller scale [6]. The hamper becomes the single object around which the entire plot turns, with concealment, discovery, retribution, and the closing verse-charm all radiating outward from this one item of humble household furniture.

The tale's central opposition is nutritional before it is narrative: *todah* against *khir*. Sharma glosses *todah* as "coarse bread made of corn-flour" and *khir* as "a delicacy made of milk, sugar and boiled rice" (9). These two foods occupy opposite ends of the culinary and social spectrum available to a poor rural household: *todah* is cheap, filling, and unremarkable, the bread of daily subsistence; *khir* is festival food, associated with celebration and honoured guests. That the wife consumes *khir* "all by herself" (8) while providing her husband with nothing but "a dry *todah*" (8) is not a minor domestic detail but the tale's entire moral and comic premise, established by its second sentence. Arjun Appadurai's influential account of what he terms "gastro-politics" in Hindu South Asia is directly relevant here: Appadurai argues that the transaction of food in South Asian domestic settings is rarely a neutral matter of nutrition, but instead "a system of transactions" that continually "encodes" the relative status, obligation, and power of household members (494). Read through this framework, the wife's daily practice of serving dry *todah* while secretly consuming *khir* constitutes a sustained, private assertion of control over the one resource the household possesses in any surplus. The husband's labour produces the harvest; the wife, who governs the kitchen, determines its redistribution unequally, and in secret [7].

The tale's comedy depends on this arrangement remaining both invisible and, once discovered, catastrophic in its consequences. Sharma frames the husband's discovery of the *khir* pot not as an act of transgression but as a moment of misplaced sentiment: seeing the pot "tucked in the hamper," he assumes, in a rush of remorseful generosity, that his wife has "conjured up a potful of *khir* to give him a surprise of his life," and reproaches himself for having been "mindful only of his own hunger" for years (9). The irony is considerable: the one occasion on which he credits his wife with tenderness is precisely the occasion on which he is mistaken, and his own hunger, once awakened by the sight of a food long denied him, overrides whatever domestic restraint might otherwise have governed his conduct. He eats not through transgression but through an emotion the tale frames as gratitude, and it is this very misreading of a gastro-political signal that precipitates the retaliation to follow [8]. The tale thereby dramatises the consequences of an accidental breach of a household's unspoken rules of food distribution, rules that were never intended to be legible to the party who breaks them.

It is equally significant that the wife does not confront her husband, demand an explanation, or pursue any form of redress within the domestic sphere. Her immediate response is instead punitive and disproportionate: "the codger had to be shown his place" (9). The scale of the punishment she subsequently engineers—summoning the raja's soldiers to seize her husband on pain of royal displeasure—stands in marked disproportion to the offence of consuming a pot of rice pudding, and this disproportion constitutes the tale's principal comic mechanism.

The disproportion also reveals something more serious about the household economy the tale depicts: because the wife's authority over food is exercised in secret, outside any recognised system of domestic negotiation, its violation cannot be redressed through ordinary domestic means either. She possesses no forum in which to lodge a grievance regarding her stolen *khir*, since the theft simultaneously exposes her own concealment [9]. Her recourse is therefore not domestic but political, the one public mechanism of arbitrary power available to her, namely the raja's court, where accusation requires no proof and desperation may be manufactured on the spot.

Sharma introduces the wife through a single characterising term, "the wife, on the other hand, was a glutton" (8) that establishes a moral asymmetry which the remainder of the tale proceeds to complicate. On an initial reading, the wife may appear simply as the antagonist of a conventional misogynist narrative: the secretly greedy woman who deprives her industrious husband of adequate sustenance and subsequently endangers his life to conceal her own transgression. The unfolding of events, however, does not permit this reading to stand unqualified. It is, after all, the wife who devises the only viable response available to a woman possessing neither independent economic standing nor recognised voice within either the domestic or political sphere: she interprets the royal proclamation regarding the queen's illness with considerable speed, accurately assesses the raja's volatile temperament "he could shower favours one moment, and rob someone of his life, the next" (10) and constructs, extemporaneously, a plausible narrative that redirects catastrophe from herself onto her husband. A. K. Ramanujan, in his influential analysis of the distinctive logic of women-centred tales within the Indian oral tradition, observes that such narratives frequently organise themselves around female protagonists whose sole available form of power is verbal: the capacity to reframe a situation through speech, precisely because power through action or property is denied them (Ramanujan 33–55) [11]. The wife's sole recorded act of direct speech in the tale, her instruction to the town crier, corresponds closely to this pattern; it constitutes a compact demonstration of persuasive fabrication, extending even to pre-emptive coaching regarding her husband's anticipated denials: "he will pretend to you he doesn't know anything about medicine... [j]ust don't pay heed to his words" (10) Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold advance a comparable argument regarding women's expressive genres in rural North India, contending that women rendered structurally dependent by formal kinship and property arrangements nonetheless retain, and exercise, considerable control over spoken and performed language within the household and the village, precisely because speech constitutes one of the few resources a patrilocal order cannot readily expropriate (Raheja and Gold). The wife's single decisive speech act belongs to this broader category of dependent yet verbally resourceful womanhood, notwithstanding the tale's own tendency, narrated from a perspective not particularly sympathetic to her, to characterize that resourcefulness as gluttony and vindictiveness rather than as survival.

The husband, by contrast, is characterized almost entirely by silence and endurance. He accepts inadequate food "resignedly" (8); summoned before the raja, he "tried hard to tell them that he was an ignorant peasant" and is not believed (10); and, significantly, upon recognising "that he had invited all this misery on himself by gobbling that pot of *khir* without the permission of his wife," he simply "kept his counsel" (10),

declining even under mortal threat to disclose his wife's scheme or her concealed *khir*. This silence merits particular attention, constituting perhaps the tale's quietest and most morally interesting detail. Sudhir Kakar's psychoanalytic study of family life in India offers one possible explanation, describing how sons and husbands within the patriarchal Indian household are habituated, from an early age, into a form of watchful passivity toward domestic authority that they are not permitted openly to contest, a passivity that manifests as silence rather than negotiation whenever domestic conflict threatens to become public (Kakar). The old man's refusal to explain himself before the raja, notwithstanding that he could, at any point, have plausibly redirected blame toward his wife's original concealment of food, is consistent with precisely this pattern of trained restraint. Whether this restraint should be understood as loyalty, fatalism, or an internalized acceptance of the wife's domestic prerogative, the tale itself does not resolve. What the tale does establish is that the household's internal conflict remains sealed off from the public, political sphere, even at the moment of gravest personal danger; the old man evidently prefers to face the raja's wrath alone rather than permit the court to glimpse the workings of his marriage.

The tale's structure follows a recognizable comic logic of escalation and reversal, recalling, without being reducible to, the classic folkloric figure of the fool who succeeds by accident. The old man exhibits neither cleverness nor resourcefulness; he does not resolve his predicament through wit. Placed before the ailing queen with a handful of prickly saroot grass and no medical knowledge whatsoever, "his mind had gone completely blank," and he remains paralysed "a long time" while the impatient raja demands that he "commence your cure, or else..." (10–11). What follows is not competence but panic rendered as ritual: the old man begins "waving a sharp saroot blade" over the queen's leg while muttering, under his breath, the truth of his predicament disguised as an incantation, a verse concerning the broken plough handle, the stolen *khir*, and his desperate wish to be sent home (11). The tale specifies that his hands shake more violently the more he recites the charm, and that it is sheer accident "as luck would have it" that the grass blade punctures the abscess and affords the queen "immediate relief" (11). The cure, in short, is not medicine but a physically involuntary consequence of terror, subsequently reinterpreted, according to the logic of royal reward, as deliberate healing skill.

This constitutes the tale's sharpest irony, and one that reflects critically upon the raja's court rather than upon the old peasant himself. The kingdom's *vaid*s, trained and credentialed practitioners of Ayurvedic medicine, have already failed to cure the queen despite "application of all the potions and poultices prescribed" (9–10); it requires an illiterate, terrified cultivator, wielding a weed and reciting what amounts to a confession of petty domestic theft, to succeed where expert knowledge could not. The tale does not articulate this irony as an explicit moral, but its structure nonetheless enacts a quiet inversion of expertise and authority, one that would likely have been both legible and satisfying to a peasant audience whose own relationship to medicine, law, and administration was mediated almost entirely by such credentialed intermediaries—*vaid*s, *viziers*, and the raja's officers. The tale's comedy is not, therefore, purely domestic in character; it carries a distinct, if measured, note of peasant scepticism toward institutional expertise, a note that recurs, in gentler or sharper form, throughout several of the volume's other comic tales, most notably in the literal-minded villagers of "But It Didn't Strike

Us!", who fail to consider using their own lamp to kindle a fire even while under interrogation by a shrewd vizier.

If the tale's first half is domestic in orientation, its second half is unmistakably political, and the political order it depicts is emphatically feudal and personalist in character. There exists no court of appeal, no evidentiary standard, and no procedure separating accusation from punishment: a wife's word to a town crier suffices to have soldiers seize an innocent, protesting man from his own field and convey him "to the King's presence" (10). The raja himself is characterised, before his own appearance in the narrative, through the wife's own assessment of him as "a man of moods," capable of bestowing favour or exacting death on pure impulse (10). This is not merely a device of plot construction; it is consistent with the broader feudatory order Sharma sketches in his preface, wherein he describes the pre-modern Dogra social system as one in which "an autocratic raja drove his subjects as he willed; so did a father his offspring, and a man his wife" (Sharma, Preface). Viewed in this light, the tale's comic plot constitutes a miniature enactment of precisely this cascading structure of arbitrary authority: the *raja* governs the kingdom by whim, the wife governs the kitchen through concealment, and the husband, positioned at the base of both hierarchies, possesses no recourse in either sphere save endurance and, when circumstances demand it, improvisation. The figure of the *vaid* merits particular attention within this political landscape, since the tale positions traditional medical authority as an extension of, rather than a check upon, royal caprice. The *vaid*s have already failed the queen through the conventional application of "potions and poultices" (9–10), yet the responsibility for producing an alternative cure falls not to further medical consultation but to a randomly accused peasant, forcibly conscripted. At no point does the tale suggest that a second medical opinion might be sought through ordinary means; the raja's proclamation instead offers a "big award" to "any of the Raja's loyal subjects" who might "come forth and rid the royal spouse of her misery," effectively delegating the failure of institutional medicine to an unregulated public contest of desperation and opportunism (9–10). Rendered here as comedy, this detail nonetheless captures a historically accurate condition of the pre-colonial and early colonial Dogra hill states, as documented by Hutchison and Vogel: legal, medical, and revenue authority were concentrated in the person of the ruler and a thin layer of court functionaries, with minimal institutional buffer between a royal whim and its enforcement upon an ordinary cultivator's life or livelihood (Hutchison and Vogel) [12]. The tale converts this historical condition into farce, though the farce remains legible only because the underlying structure of arbitrary power constituted a familiar, lived reality for its original audience. The tale's concluding device, the four-line verse the old man recites both in the queen's presence and again upon his homeward journey, marks its clearest debt to a living oral performance tradition rather than to written narrative convention. Sharma renders the charm as a rhymed English quatrain, recounting the broken plough handle, the confession of having "gobbl[ed]" the *khir*, and the repeated, escalating vow, "Never, I vow, never shall I touch the hamper again!" (11). That the tale repeats this verse verbatim at its close, following the successful cure and the granting of the reward, is structurally significant: the repetition transforms what began as a private, panicked utterance into something resembling a durable proverb or refrain, the kind of memorable, rhythmic tag capable of being carried away by a folk audience independent of the narrative frame.

Such refrains recur throughout the volume, the he-sparrow's repeated call in "Union Is Strength," the weeping mango tree's couplet in "Darling Sister of Seven Brothers"—and their presence across otherwise unrelated tales suggests a shared compositional grammar characteristic of an oral repertoire transmitted primarily through recitation rather than reading. Kirin Narayan, examining Hindu oral storytelling in the western Himalaya, makes a comparable observation, noting that such embedded verse tags are rarely ornamental; they mark the point in a performance at which a teller may transfer a phrase to the audience for completion or repetition, thereby converting a solitary act of narration into a shared, participatory one (Narayan). Stuart Blackburn, addressing the internal structuring of Indian oral tales more broadly, makes a related argument regarding how such formal devices as repetition, verse insertion, and escalating refrain often perform the function that an omniscient narrator's commentary discharges in written fiction, supplying judgment and closure without departing from the story's own voice (Blackburn 527–43).

The verse additionally performs a narrative function that prose exposition could not achieve with comparable economy. It compresses the entire chain of cause and effect, the broken plough, the theft of the *khir*, the present predicament, and the desired outcome into four lines that the old man may recite under duress without conscious deliberation, precisely because his mind, as the narrator states, "had gone completely blank" (10). In performance terms, the shift from prose to verse at the tale's moment of greatest tension exemplifies a broader feature of oral narrative, whereby formulaic, rhythmic language provides a performer, whether the fictional old man before the queen, or the actual village storyteller before an audience, with a memorised scaffold upon which to rely precisely when improvisation under pressure becomes otherwise impossible. Vladimir Propp's well-known observation, that folk narrative relies upon a limited stock of recurring functions and formulas rather than wholly original invention at every turn, offers a useful general reminder here, though the present reading deliberately declines to reduce the tale to a structuralist function-count (Propp). What matters, for a socio-cultural reading, is not the abstract morphology of the charm but its concrete, situated use as the resource of a powerless man confronting arbitrary royal judgment, and its final repetition as a form of hard-won comic self-knowledge.

It would constitute an omission, within a socio-cultural reading of this kind, not to consider briefly the frame Sharma himself provides for the tale, since his preface functions almost as a manifesto for how the entire collection, and this tale within it, ought to be read. Sharma writes that folk tales are "such a droll way of telling the truth about people," in which "the barb is there for all to see, but the pain associated with it is somehow transmogrified into the joy that comes from looking at a mirror" (Sharma, Preface). This formulation is borne out precisely by "Never Shall I Touch the Hamper Again": the barbaric unequal, food-based domestic hierarchy sustained through concealment, and a political order in which an innocent man may be seized from his field on an unsubstantiated accusation is entirely visible to any attentive reader; yet the tale converts both barbs into an occasion for laughter rather than protest. Sharma's own editorial designation of his practice is equally instructive: he describes himself, on the title page, as one who has "adapted" rather than merely translated the tales, a distinction that affords him latitude in pacing, in the selective footnoting of Dogri terms such as *todah*, *khir*, and *saroot*, and in rendering the closing

charm as an English rhymed quatrain rather than as a literal, unrhymed gloss of a Dogri original. The tale's English prose remains interspersed with untranslated, glossed Dogri and regional terms *kashtkar*, *vaid*, and *chulha* elsewhere in the volume, *todah* and *khir* here, a lexical strategy that keeps the printed English text tethered to its oral, regional source even as it addresses a national, Anglophone readership through a government publishing house.

"Never Shall I Touch the Hamper Again" is, on its surface, one of the slighter entertainments in *Tales from the Tawi*, a four-page comic anecdote unlikely to attract the sustained critical attention accorded the collection's more overtly mythic or historical tales. A close, socio-culturally attentive reading nonetheless demonstrates that the tale's comedy is inseparable from a precisely observed material world: a subsistence agrarian household in which food functions not merely as sustenance but is managed, concealed, and redistributed as a form of domestic currency; a marriage in which neither party possesses an adequate, legitimate forum for redressing grievance, such that domestic conflict is either left unspoken or displaced, catastrophically, into the public machinery of feudal justice; and a political order, sketched with equal economy, in which accusation requires no proof, royal whim outweighs institutional expertise, and an old peasant's trembling improvisation succeeds where trained vairs have already failed. Appadurai's account of gastro-politics and Ramanujan's analysis of the strategic verbal power available to women within constrained domestic economies together illuminate why the tale's comic mechanism operates precisely along the axis of food, gender, and arbitrary authority rather than along any other. Read in this manner, the tale's closing, endlessly repeated vow becomes more than a comic device; it constitutes the compressed residue of an entire social arrangement—peasant hunger, marital concealment, and feudal caprice folded into four rhymed lines that an old man will apparently continue to recite for the remainder of his days.

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