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Thoda: A study of historical and cultural identity of traditional performing martial art of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract
Thoda, a traditional martial art of Himachal Pradesh, embodies the region's rich martial heritage. Rooted in ancient warfare traditions, it has evolved into unique combination of martial practice, ritualisticperformances and competitive sports. Originating from the Mahabharata era, it is practiced by the Shathas and Pashas, believed to be descendants of the Kauravas and Pandavas.Thoda is the highlight of the five-day Bissu festival, where villagers prepare extensively decorating homes, gathering traditional weapons, and performing rituals to honour deities. The game itself is an organized archery contest, with participants aiming at opponents' lower legs, following strict rules. It symbolizes ancient warfare, with lineage-based rivalries, war cries, and songs enhancing the competitive spirit and reinforcing cultural identity. Primarily a male-dominated event, Thoda sees active participation from men while women observe from a distance. The game also reflects social stratification, where high-caste Rajputs dominate the competition, while lower castes have limited involvement. Despite modernization, Thoda remains a vibrant expression of tradition, preserving the region's martial history and cultural pride. This paper provides an overview of the game, exploring its significance, tracing its historical origins, and examining the changes it has undergone over time.

Keywords: Thoda, martial art, self -defence, cultural pride

Introduction

Martial arts, deeply rooted in cultural and historical traditions, hold a significant place in India's heritage. Originally developed for warfare, these practices have evolved into disciplines for self-defence, physical fitness, ritualistic performances, and artistic expression. They are closely linked to dance, yoga, and the performing arts, emphasizing values such as self-discipline, respect, perseverance, and inner strength—an embodiment of India's cultural identity and pride.

Thoda, a remnant of martial culture, is a popular traditional sport in the districts of Shimla, Sirmaur, and Solan. Best described as a group demonstration sport, Thoda is a unique form of archery named after the circular wooden ball that replaces the lethal arrowhead. This game, symbolizing chivalry and masculinity, is primarily played by the Rajput community, particularly during the Bissu festival.

The game features two major factions within the Rajputs, known as the Khasa— the Shathas who trace their lineage to the Kauravas, and the Pashas, who identify as followers of the Pandavas. These associations stem from the belief that their ancestors have inhabited Himachal since the time of the Mahabharata. Thoda serves as a demonstration of archery skills, using bows and arrows crafted through indigenous techniques. Players don specially designed outfits and footwear, and the game is governed by strict rules and discipline.

Beyond being a sport, Thoda is deeply intertwined with the social structure and cultural heritage of the region. Its continued popularity reflects the community's emotional connection to this ancient tradition.

Historical Origins

Numerous indigenous and traditional sports find mention in India's historic scriptures, with local games having been practiced for centuries. Evidence of martial traditions in India dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization, as seen in seals and statues depicting combat scenes. Written references to these practices emerge during the Vedic era, particularly in the Dhanurveda section of the Yajurveda. Ancient Indian epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana describe advanced combat techniques, while Malla-yuddha, an early form of unarmed combat, was systematized during this period.

Over time, these martial traditions evolved, blending with folk customs and religious influences. Different regions across India developed their own distinct martial arts, each reflecting the nation's diverse and enduring heritage. Some of these traditions are also closely linked to traditional medical systems such as Siddha and Ayurveda, with many practitioners excelling in both combat and healing arts.

A vast region spanning the districts of Sirmaur, Shimla, and Solan is home to two prominent Rajput communities—the Shathas and the Pashas. According to local beliefs, the Shathas are descendants of the Kauravas, who were sixty in number rather than a hundred, as mentioned in the Mahabharata. Meanwhile, the Pandavas remained five, as in the epic, and their followers came to be known as the Pashas, meaning "of the five."

Having been directly involved in the great war of the Mahabharata, these communities have preserved their legacy of valour over the centuries. They continue to uphold their martial traditions through an annual symbolic warfare event—an engaging folk play known as Thoda.

Preparation of the festival

The game of Thoda is played during the Bissu festival, a five-day celebration that begins on Baisakhi. As part of the festivities, villagers prepare by painting their homes and cattle sheds with white mud called Kameda and rust-colouredGeru. Wooden houses are thoroughly cleaned using ash and a grass scrubber known as Daab or Kaash.

Male members of the community gather and ready their traditional weapons, including swords (Talwaar), axes (Danngra), and bows and arrows—locally known as Dhanu and Shari (derived from the Sanskrit Shar). Homes are decorated with Buraas (rhododendron flowers), and devotional songs are sung to honour the deities. The festival, deeply rooted in the traditions of the Kauravas and Pandavas, involves the preparation of bows and arrows in accordance with these ancient customs.
This tradition is upheld to preserve the dignity and valour of warriors. To invite participation despite busy schedules, villagers sing the following song:

Bissu khelda aaye jilotiye
Bissu khelda aau,
Mere naande balu o,
Mei ghinu gaye o,
Naandu balu peen deiya,
Map deiya gaaso o,
Maai diyo seedoro dhio,
Baba diyo suro o.

The song reflects the deep-rooted agrarian lifestyle of Himachal Pradesh, showcasing the balance between responsibilities and communal celebrations. When invited to the Bissu fair and to play Thoda, the person initially hesitates, burdened by family duties—caring for young children and ensuring the milking cow is fed. However, after seeking support from parents, they receive encouragement. The mother lovingly prepares Sidku, roti, and ghee, while the father provides sura (a traditional drink), enabling the person to participate in the festivities. This narrative highlights the essence of familial cooperation and cultural traditions in rural Himachal life.

Game and Ritual

Thoda, a traditional game played in Himachal Pradesh, begins with the Bishu (Baishakhi) festival on the first day of Baishakh and continues until the end of Shravan. It is essentially a mock battle involving bows and arrows. The game takes place in an open space known as a jubbar (derived from the Sanskrit word durva), usually located in front of a village temple or on a grassy field.
Villagers form a large circle around the playing area, while referees stand to one side. The game unfolds at the centre of this circle, with two opposing groups—Shathas and Pashas—taking turns inviting each other to battle. Spectators enthusiastically support their own players, sometimes resorting to jeering or using harsh words against opponents while ensuring that the rules are followed.
As observed by D.N. Majumdar in Himalayan Polyandry (1963) [15], Thoda is a symbolic reenactment of archery-based combat. Women watch from a safe distance, while relatives from outside the village participate as rivals. Players wear woollen pads to protect their legs, as shooting above the legs is strictly prohibited. Any violation of this rule can lead to serious disputes. Beyond its competitive spirit, Thoda serves as both a form of entertainment and a test of skill and battle readiness.

'Thodai'- The Players

The game of Thoda is traditionally played between two prominent Rajput communities—Shathas and Pashas. The Shathas are believed to be descendants of the Kauravas, while the Pashas are considered followers of the Pandavas, leading to a symbolic rivalry between the two groups. As G.S. Bhatt notes in The Spatial-Social Structure of Shanthi and Panshi, their division is rooted in both mythology and political-cultural history. According to legend, those who had friendly ties with the Pandavas came to be known as Pashas, while those who opposed them were called Shathas (Bhatt, 2010) [6].
The primary participants in Thoda are Rajputs or Khasas, although Brahmins and Kolis also partake in the game, but only within their own caste groups. A key rule is that players must compete against individuals from a different lineage—facing off against kinsmen from the same lineage is not permitted.
On the designated day, the invited players set off from their village with grandeur, each carrying at least one weapon, such as a farsha (axe), gandasa (hatchet), dangra (large axe), tsar (sword), dhal (shield), or a bow and arrows. They march forward in high spirits, singing and dancing to the beats of drums and trumpets. Along the way, they engage in mock firing and theatrically brandish their weapons, chanting songs of heroic warriors to energize themselves and the spectators.
The Paashe will sing:

Phulo lo phultu jalti daai,
Dhaad liyayi shaathi ki baadiyo khaai——limbira o limbira
Kaali aayi baadli rangoli gijo
Shaathi ke gaao di podli bijo—limbira o limbira
Tungo ri lakdi kodua dhua,
Shaathi re bedo ra siyaana bhu—limbira o limbira

It means that the Shaate steal other goods and divide the booty among themselves. The black clouds have surrounded the field and vultures have started swirling in the sky. It seems that thunderbolt has struck the opponents. If the wood burns it creates smoke. It seems that the sayana of Shaate is dead. While singing this song they will proceed towards the field. Loud music is played on drums. The boys hold long sticks and dance and shout aloud. On their way they will keep challenging the opponents. The women who are dressed beautifully walk behind the young lads. The opponents accept the challenge and the Shathas sing:

Dhaav shuni kubhiyan Jodi daara,
Uda pode mukhe thode malbekhe,
Shiga aai danda jubidi khe, teri dedva shaafdi chudi aa-aa
Kho shia uchala echa kaalpod, jesri bijo shi podi –aa

This means that I am calling you to play Thoda. Hurry and come to the Jubad. I will break your bones. Do not jump so much that you will remain awe-struck and will be unable to move. As they approach the field their song and music becomelouder, and excitement grows.

Thoda -the Game

The actual duel begins when a young warrior from the Shatha side steps into the jubbar, holding an arrow made of sharp-edged local phiral wood in one hand and a nearly two-meter-long bow, typically crafted from chamba wood, in the other. He kisses his weapons, invokes his family deity—the mighty Vijat—and boldly challenges his opponents.

In response, a warrior from the opposing Pasha side advances to the centre of the arena. He first praises the jubbar, salutes the game of Thoda, and prays to his family goddess, the sixty-handed deity, seeking her blessings for victory. The two then begin an impressive, rhythmic dance, moving with pride and intensity.

As they draw closer, an exchange of fiery dialogues ensues. Each proclaims himself a lion, a high-born Khash Rajput, a warrior so skilled that he could strike down a bird in flight. They boast of their ancestors' valour, recall past victories over one another, and issue daring warnings. One taunts the other to retreat while there is still time, adding to the thrill and excitement of the moment.

These witty and spirited exchanges ignite the enthusiasm of the spectators and provoke other young warriors from both Shatha and Pasha sides. Unable to resist the urge to display their own bravery and skill, many more players leap into the arena, brandishing their bows and arrows, eager to join the battle.

The shooting takes place in turns. While one player takes aim, the opponent dances energetically, swiftly moving his legs to evade the shot. If the striker lands a successful hit, he leaps up triumphantly and declares, "I have not spared even the swift four-footed stag—how could I let a mere two-legged man escape? Here lies a sluggish buffalo, silenced forever!"

But the battle is far from over. It is now the opponent's turn to strike. He positions himself, takes aim, and lets his arrow fly. If he too succeeds, he celebrates with equal fervor, exclaiming, "A jackal dared to trespass into the jubbar, and now he lies defeated on the ground! I believe in repaying debts—and I have settled this one in full!"

This spirited exchange continues as the Shathas, believed to be descendants of the sixty Kauravas, and the Pashas, associated with the five Pandavas, keep alive their age-old tradition of mock warfare—echoing the legendary battles of the Mahabharata.

Rules of the game

The rules for this game are very simple but at the same time the discipline must be maintained. There are many in the field, but the fight is only between two of equal strength. No one will throw an arrow upon a third fighter. No one can strike unless the bow is stretched to full arm'slength, the hind hand touching the ear. The player shall always aim at the lower part of the legs below the knees. Any strike above the knee may result in an actual fight and the players take out their daangra (Axe). In olden days cheating in the game lead to bloodsheds but nowadays it is not so because of the implementation of the Indian Penal Code. But it can certainly lead to a verbal dialogue.

Implements Used

The bow is approximately 5.5 ft in length. Its stave is madeeither ofChamba wood or bamboo. Its string is also made of thin bamboo strip which is tied to the ends of the stave with strings. The arrow used for the purpose of thodais made of sharp edged local phiral. The arrow measures approximately 2 feet. It is a simple arrow with a blunt metal tip. The arrow is placed on the string and pulled back. This requires a lot of strength itself.

Songs Sung during the Game

When the game is being played each player sing about his glorious lineage and about the bravery of his forefathers for example

Het mera shate uri, het mera naaliya,
Beta oso singa ra, ju bano urde kaago di gaadi,
Jaaya oso khoshta, mera mara paani ne maago.

This means that you cannot play thoda against me, no one can defeat me, I am son of Singa who was a great warrior, so swift as if he flew like a crow flies over the huge baan trees. I am son of a Khasa and One whom I hit and defeat cannot even ask for water. Communication is also affected by games. We find certain Metaphors arising from the game of Thoda for example

Jubad ujadna- to challenge somebody.
Suthan laana- to accept the challenge.
Gaashkilaana-to cheat.
Shori Kaatna-To accept defeat.
Bissu ka bish-to be extremely tired.

Significance of the Game

As Clifford Geertz suggests, games hold symbolic significance, and Thoda is no exception. This mock battle preserves the chivalrous traditions and ethnic identity of warrior clans in Himachal Pradesh. Oral literature in the region recounts tales of bravery, historic rivalries, and family honour, reinforcing social behaviour and relationships.

Thoda is a physically demanding game that showcases martial strength and endurance. Players endure powerful blows, often suffering blood clots and temporary deafness, yet they persist, proving their resilience and masculinity. The game serves as a training ground for young men, preparing them for adversity and reinforcing their warrior ethos.

Victory in Thoda elevates players to heroic status, earning them fame and admiration. As Holt, suggest, sports heroes become cultural icons, symbolizing mastery over adversity.

Gender-Specific Game

Thoda is a gender-specific game, traditionally played only by men. While women may observe the event, they do not actively participate, making it a display of masculine strength and endurance. This exclusion is largely influenced by the patriarchal structure of Himachalis society, where women hold a respected position but are not involved in physically demanding sports like Thoda.

This phenomenon aligns with broader studies on gender in sports. As noted in anthropological research, sports are often gendered, reinforcing, and reflecting societal notions of masculinity and femininity. MacClancy (1996) [14] highlights a similar trend in Spain, where bullfighting has historically been perceived as a male domain, despite the presence of female bullfighters over the centuries who have taken the same risks and endured the same injuries as their male counterparts.

Similarly, Brownell (1995, 1996) [7] observes that the success of Chinese sportswomen has reshaped national representation, emphasized endurance and sacrifice as key feminine values within China's sports culture. Sánchez León (1993) further examines gender distinctions in Peruvian sports, where football, predominantly played by men, is associated with freedom and improvisation, while volleyball, a female-dominated sport, symbolizes responsibility and discipline.

Thoda's male exclusivity, therefore, reflects not only Himachali traditions but also broader global patterns where sports serve as a medium for expressing and reinforcing gender roles.

Social Stratification reflected in the Game

In a typical village community, caste structure follows a hierarchical order with three distinct groups.

a. At the top are the high castes, comprising Brahmins and Khasas (Rajputs), who holds a dominant position in the social order.
b. In the middle is an intermediate group that includes castes such as Badi, Sunar, Jagdi, Nath and Lohar
c. At the lowest tier are the low castes, primarily theKoltas or Kolis, and in some areas, communities such as Dom and Mochi.

While this caste hierarchy has evolved due to historical and geo-economic factors, its widespread acceptance is also reinforced by religious traditions. This social structure is reflected in the game of Thoda as well.

The primary participants in Thoda are high-caste Rajputs. The game is not played among individuals of the same lineage; instead, the Shathas compete against the Pashas. Brahmins rarely take part, and the Bajgis do not play at all. Koltas may sometimes participate, but only within their caste groups—Koltas from the Shatha side will face off against Koltas from the Pasha side, maintaining the same competitive structure as their higher-caste counterparts. However, inter-caste matches do not occur, as Bajgis and Koltas can only play within their own caste boundaries.

Conclusion

The game of Thoda, like many traditional sports, serves as more than just a form of entertainment; it is a medium of communication, cultural expression, and identity formation. Through its unique linguistic metaphors and emotionally charged performances, it fosters a deep connection between players and spectators, reinforcing community bonds and constructing new heroic identities.

Beyond its role in entertainment, Thoda reflects societal values, particularly in terms of prestige, gender roles, and social hierarchy. The participation and exclusion within the game highlight broader societal attitudes, while its historical and ritualistic significance underscores its deep cultural roots. Additionally, the political dimension of traditional games cannot be overlooked, as they are often utilized as instruments of influence and mobilization.

In essence, Thoda is not just a sport but a reflection of the society that plays it—a living tradition that intertwines history, culture, identity, and power.

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