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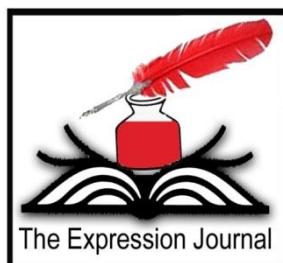
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THE CULTS OF NAG DEITIES IN THE SHIVALIK HILLS

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Abstract

Worship of *Nagas* is prevalent throughout India and as old as Indian civilization. Himachal Pradesh is among all those places where worship of *Nagas* traced back to Christian era. The people of Himachal Pradesh have great belief in snake worship. The temples of serpent are found in each and every village of Himachal Pradesh. But here two kinds of faiths are popular among inhabitants of Himachal Pradesh, one in the upper hills and other in the lower hills. Both are separate in their identity. Worship of snakes in the upper hills traces its origin from epic age, while in the lower hills (District- Chamba, Kangra, Hamirpur, Bilaspur, Una, Solan and Sirmaur of Himachal Pradesh) from medieval times. In the lower hills the cult of *Gugga* is prevalent. But the cult of *Gugga* had been prevalent in *rajputana* long before it was introduced into Western Himalayas. But traces of serpent worship goes back to early century, early inhabitants were familiar with the worship of venomous reptiles. Although strayed evidences found at *Dehra Gopipur* and *Bharoli* in the Kangra district indicate that life must be started very early in this region.

Keywords

Snake, Worship, Lower Hills, Shivalik Hills, Naga and Local Cult.

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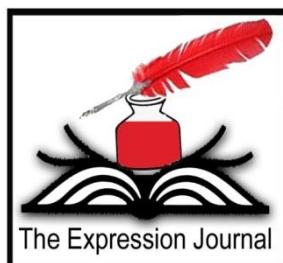
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I

Religion and spiritual convictions are closely interlinked with society and culture of Western Himalayas. It has been become essential to study the religious practices and beliefs of hills, while discuss about the socio-cultural life of hills. Religion cannot be neglected from the socio-cultural life of hills. The people of hills are very devotional minded (Thakur, 1997) and obviously because religion and rituals have important role in their daily life. They have great belief in their local deities besides the pan Hindu pantheon of Indian sub-continent. These deities worshiped for the prosperity and well-being of the generations, protection of animals and safety from the natural calamities. These Devi's and Devtas are believed to be the manifestation of Lord Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. Mostly the local devtas are believed to be manifestations of Shaivites; worship of Shiva is more common in mountainous areas. The people of Himachal have a unique way of celebrating fairs and performing traditional rituals to mark births, deaths, harvests, or good rain fall. Ancient folk deals with stories of gods or war heroes or chieftains. The people of Himachal love festivals and participate with great enthusiasm in local festivals and fairs. In the western Himalayas no religious function is considered complete without the presence and blessings of the devta. The various cults of spatial origin are prevalent in Himachal Pradesh each village has its own deity called as Gram Devta (Village God) in Local language. The people of different ethnicity had migrated from various parts of the subcontinent. The process of migration was slow, but continued from centuries, up to the 18th century. They have different reasons for the migration; the most common was the safety of life during political turmoil of the plains. The people who had come to hills are not only physical migrations but they had brought their socio-religious practices. The worship of snake deities is one of them. Worship of snakes gods under the various twist of the

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racio-cultural fusion, had been one of the most primitive belief systems of India. It is develops as popular belief system in the western Himalaya's interiors with the transmigration of people of diverse ethnicity from the plains (Handa: 2004, pp.7).

II

The earliest evidence of ophiolatry have found in the different classical texts, numismatic and archaeology. A large hoard of coins issued by Audumbaras found at *Trippal* (Kangra). Numismatic consideration tends to place them in the period from the second century B.C to the first century A.D. but they appear too flourished before second century B.C (Charak: 1978, pp.84). Like the Audumbaras and Kalutas, Kunindas issued bi-script coins. These coins have been found at *Tappa Mewa* in Hamirpur District of Himachal Pradesh, at *Sunit* four miles west of Ludhiana, at Jawalamukhi, at Karnal and also at Behat near Sharanpur (Charak: 1978, pp.78). The serpentine line and symbols of Shiva appears on these coins can interpreted as they know the importance of venomous reptile, tried to appease him by worshipping on different occasion. It is of some interest to note that both the upper and lower hills were swayed by the serpent cult with its many forms and manifestations. If there is anything of importance next to *Shiva* in the hills, it is cult of *Nagas* (Vaidya: 1977, pp. 17). Different stories of *Naga* origin are prevalent in the hills. There is a mythological tale about the origin of the *Naga* race. It is said that a sage named *Kashyap* once married two women. *Kadru*, the elder gave birth to such creatures as half man and half snake (Vaidya: 1977, pp. 16). Second is about *Kamru Nag* of Mandi, deity is as old as of the times of the Mahabharata. It is believed that *Nag Deities* have power to cure epidemic diseases. The cult of *Mahun Nag* is famous in Shimla and Sirmaur. It is believed that goddess *Mansa Devi* is the goddess of snakes. She is unknown in the hills but well known in Bengal and they worshipped her on the eve of *Nag Panchami*. The hill gods are supposed to stand by the people in all their good and bad days as pointed out earlier that while they are remembered on all happy occasion, they must also be approached in all adversaries. In times of drought the rain giving gods are particularly remembered (Vaidya: 1977, pp. 5). As agriculture is the mainstay of the people and yield depend much on climatic factor. *Nagas* are associated with water spring and also are credited with power of granting rain (Vaidya: 1977, pp. 4). In the lower hills there are numerous *peepal* (*Ficus Religiosa*) platforms, many of which are constructed near the water springs. The stone slab carrying figures of the *Nagas* are placed on peepal platform where these are objects of worship for the ladies who also circumambulate the sacred tree (Vaidya: 1977, pp. 15). It may be only in the western Himalayan region that the *Nagas devta* is regarded as the lord of weather-cloud, and all other related phenomena, and his spouse, the *Nagin* is associated with the lightening. In this function aspect, the rain-bestowing *Naga* deity has also traditionally been addressed as *narain* (Handa: 2004, pp. 140). In the other case people of hills are regarded Nagas as the one among them or an ancestor. Although ancestor's in the hills are considered as the protector of family and semi gods for blessing of prosperity regularly.

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III

This cult came into existence along with fugitive cadets from central India, who established their hegemony in the *tarai* belt of this region. It is only in that belt that this cult is largely confined. The most prominent representation of this cult is *Gugga Jaharpir*. The cult of *Gugga* is firmly entrenched in large foothill tract from Jammu to Sirmaur. In this tract, he is known by different names, viz., *Gugga Chauhan*, believed that he is belonged to the *Chauhan* clan of the *Rajputs*, *Gugga Rana*, for he was a *Rana (rao) of Dhandera*, *Gugga Jaharpir*, as saint (*pir*), who cure poison (*Jahar*), *Nile Ghore- ka Sawar*, horse he rode was blue colour, *Gugga Vir*, great warrior hero (*vir*), etc. However he is popularly addressed as *Gugga Jaharpir* or *Gugga Pir*, possibly under the Mohammedan influence. Although, he was undeniably a *Hindu*, yet the Mohammedan believe him as the one of them, and go to his shrine to seek his blessings. Above all these aspects of his personality, his image as *Jaharpir* commands the maximum cult following irrespective of any distinction of caste and creed (Handa: 2004, pp. 317). The story of *Gugga's* birth runs that *Bachla* and *Kachla* were two sisters wedded to a *Rajput* king named *Devraj*. They had no children and were worried on that account. One day Bachla visited the shrine of *Gorakhnath*. The *Gorakhnath* assured her that when next she visited next morning, he would bless her with a boon. Hearing about the promised boon, Kachla lost no time and in the guise of her sister visited *Gorakhnath* next morning. The *Gorakhnath* gave her a fruit to eat which she hurriedly took. When Bachla visited the saint, he was taken with surprise. However, she was given another fruit. Bachla took half of the fruit and another she gave to the mare she was riding. The fruit had their results. Kachla got a daughter named *Gugri* and Bachla a son named *Gugga*. The mare also had a foal. Gugga as the blessed son became great hero of his times (Vaidya: 1977, pp. 19). According to a tradition, *Arjun* and *Surjun* the cousins of Gugga demanded their share in the ancestral property. He however, refused to oblige his malicious cousins. They felt very bad about that, yet maintained a sympathetic face. One day, they persuaded *Gugga* to accompany them for hunting. In the forest they treacherously pounced upon him to kill him, but they themselves became victim. *Gugga* managed to escape and killed them both. He returned home with the heads of *Arjun* and *Surjun* tied to the saddle of his *Nila Ghora*. When his mother Bachla saw the heads of Arjun and Surjun, she cursed *Gugga* and scolded him by saying, "see me no more, nor let me see you again" *Gugga* took his mother at her words, and appealed to the mother earth to swallow him. However, the earth refused to accept him (Handa: 2004, pp. 321-22). The ballads, who sing the life story of Gugga Rana, further extended the story that on the request of his wife *Sulihar*, promised to meet her every night. Once Bachla noticed that her daughter-in- law meets someone and inquired whom she is meeting. Sulihar explained all about the Gugga promise. Bachla wants to meet *Gugga*. So she sat in hiding next night to know about the truth. As per the words of Sulihar *Gugga Rana* come to meet her in the mid of night, his mother come forward to see him. When he has realised the presence of his mother, he goes very angry and said now he will never come again and disappeared. Every year, on the night of the full moon in the month of *Bhadon*, *Guggaji* is taken out for a week-

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long *yatra*. On the seventh day he returns, and the eighth night is celebrated as *jagrata*, dedicated to *Gugga*. It falls on *Janmashtami*, which is the celebration of the birth of Krishna. The *jagrata* begins with a holy fire. The devotees play the *dhol* and *khajar* in celebration, and perform local songs and dances in the form of *natti*, *harul* and *khashu-geet*. During the *jagrata*, devotees are said to go into a trance, to feel the presence of the devta and have sacred rice showered on them as a way of breaking the trance. *Kheer Patuanda* is a specially-prepared flavored rice pudding that is eaten at *Gugga Navami*. The cult of *Gugga* is main symbol of *Nāga* worship in the lower hills. It is believed that *Gugga* is descendant of *Chauhan* family of the *Rajputana*. The *Gugga* worshiped as a serpent-god and has his shrines at various places (Sharma: 2006, pp. 270). His ballad is the longest one and sung for about eight days by team of eight to nine people called *Mandli*. This is commencing from *Rakhsha Bandhan* to *Gugga Navami*.

IV

The cult of *Gugga* had been prevalent in rajputana long before it was introduced into the Western Himalayan hills. In the Chauhan family's *Gugga Rana* has been revered and worshipped as their ancestral deity. Even at present, the Chauhan married women are obliged to observe *pardah* by extending *duppata* over their faces as mark of respect for the male elderly person of the family, whenever they happen to pass by a *Guggamadhi* or visit a *Gugga* shrine to pay an obligatory homage on the occasion of birth marriage, etc. Such occasional visits to *Guggamadhi* are known as *jatra* (Handa: 2004, pp. 330). From medieval history learn that *Gugga Chauhan* was a contemporary to Prithaviraj Chauhan. The cult of *Gugga Jaharpur* is not very old in this region. It was introduced in the hills from Rajputana around the beginning of seventeenth century, when many Rajput families are believed to have migrated to the foothills of the western Himalayan region under the hostile conditions in their homeland. The gradual penetration of those families in the interior region prompted introduction of *Gugga* cult in the interior pocket also, but there it remained humbled (Handa: 2004, pp. 319). *Gugga* shrine are widely scattered almost everywhere in the foothill area of hill region. Notable of these have been identified but there are many other at various places and day in day out, new ones are coming up. From the pattern of *Gugga* shrines in Himachal Pradesh, it would emerge that these are area- specific, confined to the outer *tehsil* in Kangra, Una, Hamirpur, Bilaspur, Mandi, Solan and Sirmaur Districts, where the Rajput population predominates. The highest number of the *Gugga* shrines may be found in the Ghumarwin *tehsil* of the Bilaspur district. Interestingly, because of the preponderance of the *Gugga* shrines in the Geherwin area, the *pargana* of Geherwin is traditionally known as the *Gugge-ra-pargana*, i.e., the *pargana* of *Gugga* (Handa: 2004, pp. 331-332). The total number of *Gugga* shrines counted in the region near about thousand, which have some prominence. As would be clear from the above discussion that *Naga* and *Gugga* are two different deities but both are manifestations of the same serpent cult. So the snake emblem is common to the two deities. One thing notable is that the snake worship in the hills is not a past but is a living cult (Vaidya: 1977, pp. 20).

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The worship of snakes is considered as important due to his different role in day to day life of agrarian community. Whereas worship of venomous reptile is saves them from fear of death by his poison. On the other hand by appease him they assured prosperity and safety of progeny. When people worshipped him as semi god or as ancestral figure, they satisfied their religious and ritual desires. The worship of snakes/ Naga is continued from primitive man to the present. Various cult related to Naga worship is known in the hills either it is upper hills or lower hills, which are near to the plains of Punjab. The cult of Gugga is mostly prevalent in the lower hills with some differences. The cult of Gugga is recognized by each caste and religion of the region.

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