

## **NĀGA WORSHIP IN HIMACHAL PRADESH: SOME OBSERVATIONS**

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### **Abstract**

Himachal Pradesh is widely popular for its *devatā*-culture. Due to the uniqueness of this culture, it has remained a popular academic attraction for the researchers of different disciplines. People are deeply connected with their *ishta-devātas* or their local deities. They adherently followed the suzerainty of their local deity only. The law made by their deities are supreme for them. Rituals and traditions associated with these deities are continuously followed by the followers. Nāga worship is also an important part of this *devatā*-culture. People worship these Nāga deities for different purposes. The focus of this study is to explain the reasons why these deities are worshipped. The famous Nāga deities of Himachal Pradesh and the location of their shrines have been also highlighted along with their impact on the village communities.

**Keywords:** *bāndā* (share), *dhari* (flow of ghee), *khānda* (iron mace), Nāga worship.

### **Introduction**

Nāga worship is one of the earliest forms of worship. The evidence of this worship has not been only found from the single place but from every country of the ancient world.<sup>1</sup> This cult is believed to be derived from the indigenous beliefs. In Vedic times the word Ahi or Vritra was used for the Nāga.<sup>2</sup> It is very difficult to trace when and how the Nāga worship started in Himachal Pradesh, but it can be certainly said that the Nāga worship and traditions associated with it remained part and parcel of the people of Himachal Pradesh since ancient times.

### **Evidences of Nāga Worship in Himachal Pradesh**

Numerous temples, pilgrimage places, springs, stepwells, ponds, forests and lakes related to Nāga deities have shown the existence of Nāga worship. Some names such as Nāga deu, Nāga ra dehrā, Nāga ri Nagon or Nāgoni, Nāga Bon, Nāga ri ghar, Nāga ri nali, Nāgoni Saur, Nāgvān, Nāga chala Nāgmi, Nāgothi, Nāga wadi, Nāggoi or Nāgwai, Nāgan jaan, Bhagsu Nāga and many other popular colloquial words have also revealed the presence of Nāga worship.<sup>3</sup> Many popular folk myths about the origin of the Nāga deity in Himachal Pradesh have also highlighted the presence of Nāga worship. Besides many archaeological, literary, oral and contemporary sources throwing light on the worship.

## Some Popular Nāga Deities of Himachal Pradesh

### Nāga Deities of Chamba

In the Chamba region Nāga worship is considered as the oldest form of worship. The number of Nāga shrines were many in the past, but later the number of temples has declined. The Nagini shrines are also found in Chamba. Most of the images of Nāgas are made of stone in human form with the figure of a snake entwined around it.<sup>4</sup> The temples of these Nāga s deities are erected near the cedar trees which are considered under the jurisdiction of the deity and cannot be cut down by anyone till today.<sup>5</sup>

Among the gaddis of Chamba, Kailung Nāga is recognized as the father of all the Nāgas.<sup>6</sup> Iron mace (*khandā*), a goat and red cap were offered to him by the devotees.<sup>7</sup> Vasuki Nāga, Shesh Nāga, Khajji Nāga, Indru Nāga, Vintru Nāga, Dehant Nāga, Dhindhu Nāga, Mahal Nāga, Jamun Nāga, Nāga at Pukhar, Gutadu Nāga, Kangad Nāga, Kathura Nāga, Kalu Nāga, Manivar Nāga, Nandalu Nāga, Nandyasar Nāga and Suana Nāga are widely worshipped in Chamba. Vasuki Nāga was brought to Chamba from Bhadrawah in Jammu and Kashmir while Indru Nāga is said to have come to Chamba from the former state of Suket.<sup>8</sup>

### Nāga Deities of Kulu District

The life of the people of this region revolves around religious beliefs. Even today, gods and goddesses are an integral part of the people of this region. Nāga s are also worshipped along with other gods and goddesses in this region. There are many temples in Kulu. Beautiful examples of woodcraft are found in these temples. Images of snakes are carved at the entrance of the temples. At some places, iron statues of snakes have also been made. According to some scholars, the Nāgas were also among the tribals of this region. There is hardly any valley in Kulu where there is no evidence of Nāga. Nāgas are worshipped in almost all villages or parganas of Kulu.

These Nāgas deities are also found in many folk tales, folk songs, folk beliefs and folk traditions. Like other parts of India, there might also be a Nāga community in Himachal, which is no longer there. But Nāga worshippers are still there. Following Nagas are worshipped in the different places of Kulu. For example, Vasuki Nāga of Halan, Dhupal Nāga of Halan II, Shirghan Nāga of village Bhanara, Kaliya Nāga of Shiradh, Kumardanu of Vyasari, Fali Nāga of Prini, Kana or Kanchan Nāga of Goshal, Piuli Nāga of Batahar, Mahuti Nāga of Kothi Kias, Shukli Nāga of Shukla, Shankhu Nāga, Sharshai Nāga, Balu Nāga of Tandi, Chamahun Nāga of Badagran, Vasuki Nāga of Thativeed, Bhudhi Nagin of Sareulsar, Ringu Nāga, Nine Nāgas of Nirmand, Takrasi Nāga, Kui Kanda Nāga, Ludru Nāga and Paneui Nāga.<sup>9</sup>

### Nāgas in Mandi Region

Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh is also the prime place of Nāga worship. There are many places in this region whose names are associated with the names of Nāga deities. Kamaru Nāga, Māhun Nāga, Seri Nāga, Dhamuni Nāga, Kunhavi Nāga, Kaliya Nāga, Kalvi Nāga, Tundali Nāga, Chawasi Nāga, Pokkhi Nāga, Nāga of Somakothi, Shati Nāga are widely worshipped in this district. Oral sources of this area have revealed the existence of Nāga.<sup>10</sup>

### Nāga Deities of Shimla Region

Kandru Nāga devatā is considered as the most powerful deity among the Nāga deities of Shimla hills.<sup>11</sup> It is said that the present Narkanda of Shimla region was named as Nāgkanda with the passage of time the name changed into Narkanda. Devatā Nāga of Dhanal, devatā Nāga of Dhali, Nāga of Ghund, Sharvan or Chathla Nāga, Goli Nāga of Koth Khai, Nāga deity of Brua are also popular in Shimla region.<sup>12</sup>

### **Why Nāgas are Worshipped**

In Himachal Pradesh, the Nāga deities are worshipped for different purposes and reasons. The local people visit the temples of these deities from time- to-time to fulfill their wishes, to follow the rituals following the past tradition, to avoid any kind of misfortune, for good production of crops or for good rainfall throughout the year and to get rid of some troubles and for peace of mind. Every first crop is offered to the deity by the local people. The first milk and ghee of the cows are also offered to the Naga deity before they are consumed by the people. Some years back, goats or ram were also sacrificed to please the deity. But now the sacrifice of animals is totally banned in such temples. Broadly, the Naga deities are worshipped for getting the following boons from them.

#### **For Granting of Rain**

In some areas of Himachal Pradesh, the Nāgas are worshiped for granting rain. Kamaru Nāga deity of Mandi region is popularly known as the rain-granting deity. Some of the Nāga deities of Chamba region are also worshiped for granting of rain.<sup>13</sup> For this, temples of these Nāga deities are visited by the devotees in the time of drought or famine in Chamba. Sheep and goats were offered to Nāga by the people. If there was ever excess rainfall, offerings were made in the temple of the Nāga deity to stop it.<sup>14</sup>

#### **To Increase the Wealth of Cattle**

Some people worship the Nāga deity for the growth of cattle wealth. According to a widely prevalent practice in Himachal Pradesh, the milk and ghee of a newly delivered cow cannot be used by the owner of the cow unless it is first offered to the local Nāga deity of that particular area. This practice of offerings of ghee is known as *dhari* in the Karsog area of the Mandi region.<sup>15</sup> This rule is also strictly followed by the Gaddi community of cattle herders of Bharmour. So, they offered the cow's first milk, buttermilk (Lassi), and ghee to their Nāga deities. It is believed that if the people who belong to that particular area did not offer it to the Nāga deity, then the cow and the calf will surely be struck in some trouble.<sup>16</sup> A small earthen pot filled with ghee will be preserved for the deity and on the occasion of the *sakranti* that would be presented to the Nāga deity.

#### **As a Symbol of Fertility**

Apart from this, Nāga deities are also considered to be the givers of progeny and their protectors. According to an oral tradition prevalent in the Karsog region, a woman of this region who does not have children, worship the Kamaru Nāga deity. She made a wish that with the blessing of Kamaru Nāga she would be able to become a mother of her own child so as a reverence she would offer a pair of gold earrings to Nāga. Soon her wish came true and as per her wish she threw her earrings into the lake of Kamaru Nāga. When the woman was returning from the temple, she stopped near a water source on the way to drink water. When she extended her palms to drink water, woman thought that she had wasted her gold

ornaments by throwing them into the lake because she felt that Kamru Nāga had not given her son, it was probably her own fate that gave birth to him. When the woman was thinking all this, the same gold ornaments came into her hands and at the same time her son died.<sup>17</sup>

### **To cure People from the snakebites**

Nāgas are also revered for their ability to protect against snakebites and to heal from them. Mahun Nāga deity of Karsog region is specifically worshipped to remove the poison from the body of a person who is bitten by a snake. As per the folk belief, the person who has been bitten by a snake is kept in the courtyard of the temple of Nāga Devatā. Only male people are allowed to touch the victims of the snake bites until he or she gets well. This ritual is followed for three or five days.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, the small pebble or stones are also brought from the place where the person was bitten by the snake to the temple of the Nāga Devatā. That victim person is fed only milk; he is not allowed to eat any other food until he gets cured completely. In the temple of Mūl Māhun Nāga the victims are not cured from the venom by any person but in a form of honeybee, the deity arrived to heal a victim of snake bite, and by circling him, Nāga eliminates the poison from his body.<sup>19</sup>

Researcher has also remained as the witness of such incidents of snake bites. Four of our close relatives namely Mrs. Krishna Devi, Vanshika, Mrs. Soma Devi and Mrs. Jindi Devi were bitten by the snakes in different locations of the Karsog tehsil of Mandi district. All were brought to the temples of Mūl Māhun Nāga of Sawa Māhun and Pali Māhun Nāga respectively. No other treatment was given to them. The venom of snake bite was only cured by the Nāga deity, they were not hospitalized by their family members. All of those are still alive even after snakebites.<sup>20</sup>

Every year, on the occasion of *sakranti* of the Jyestha month, the worshippers of the Mūl Māhun Nāga deity offer *bāndā* and offerings in his temple to avoid snakebites. We also follow this tradition every year. If this tradition is not followed by the local people, then that family is affected with the curse of Nāga deity for the whole year.

### **Locations of the Nāga Temples**

Temples of Nāga gods and goddesses are usually built on the highest peak in the village in the local style. At some places, these temples are surrounded by the deodar trees in the top of the forest far from the village, constructed with the raw materials of stones and wood. In these small shrines, the images of snakes are carved on the wooden pillars or stones. Some of the idols, Nāga deities are depicted as a ruler. These idols of Nāgas are shown in human form, with snakes carved all around them. Gradually old temples are getting worn out and need constant repairs. Due to current changes in the society Naga shrines in the villages are decaying.

### **Conclusion**

The article presents a detailed survey of the Nāga worship in Himachal Pradesh through various existing evidence, including personal interviews conducted with the temple functionaries associated with Nāga temples. After conducting the extensive field-surveys in Himachal Pradesh some important opinions have been gathered regarding the worship of Nāga deities. As per these opinions: firstly, Nāga are worshipped as a rain-granting deity.

This opinion is most prevalent and widely acceptable throughout Himachal Pradesh because in the condition of drought, or during the heavy rainfall most of the followers of Nāga deities visited the temples of their Nāga deities. Second reason behind Nāga worship is the ability of the Nāga deities to cure the victim of the snakebites. The third opinion is associated with Nāga worship is multiplying the wealth of cattle. Therefore, the offerings of milk and ghee are made to these deities. Nāga deities are also worshipped as a symbol of fertility.

Gradually, due to lack artistic and aesthetic tastes the temples are getting destroyed. Due to the social change temples built in every village are becoming dilapidated. While some temples are renovated by the local communities. The local artistic features are rapidly eliminating from these local temples. It is a matter of concern. If such local artistic elements would continuously decline from these temples the uniqueness of this Himavant style (pagoda and pent-roofed styles) would become extinct in time.

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