

Religious Practices in Western Himalaya; Historical and Ritualistic Analysis of Naga Cult in Pangri Valley of Himachal Pradesh

Rajender kumar¹

Assistant Professor,
Department of history,
HPU Regional centre Dharmashala

Article History:

Received: 12-12-2024

Revised: 25-01-2025

Accepted: 05-02-2025

Abstract:

This work mainly reflects the emergence and development of the Naga cult in India. The article mainly discusses around the early development of the Naga worship in ancient India and how it developed into one of the most popular regional cult of Western Himalaya and with times how it expanded. This work also, however, discusses about the Naga cult often involves the worship of serpent deities and is deeply intertwined with the Pangwal tribal communities' way of life. The history of the Naga cult in Pangri Valley likely spans generations, with rituals, stories, and traditions passed down through oral history. Snake worship is one of the most ancient form of the worship in pangri valley.

Introduction

Ritual is a part of our day today life. An average human being performs many types of socio-religious pattern of rituals in his/her lifetime. In each work, ritual plays an important role because no work is completed without performing it in appropriate manner. Ritual is a set of actions performed mainly for their symbolic value. It is the performance of ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition or by sacerdotal decree. It is a specific, observable mode of behaviour exhibited by all known societies. Sometimes ritual can be considered as manner of performing all worship significant manners which are approachable to all. It is thus possible to view ritual as a way of defining or describing human life, culture and traditions through a proper and specific approach. It is considered essential to make human being more authoritative through comply with some rules of life and in the same manners rituals either social or religious, makes one powerful and influential. Ritual gives direction to individual to act in particular ways in everyday life and in the conduct of certain rights and ceremonies for religious services or on public occasions. For the Hindus, the rituals are the way of life, and there will be no exaggeration if we say it is the soul of Hinduism. Hinduism is not merely the name of any religion. Nevertheless, it is a way of life and name of the beliefs and principles, which an individual follow through out in his life. These principles are related to the Vedic and Pauranic philosophy. As for the word Hindu, it is derived from the word Indu. Greek used to call the river Sindhu as Indus therefore; the people who were the natives of surroundings of Sindh or Indus

came to known as Indu by the Greeks. Later the words 'Indu' turn out to Hindu, and their age philosophy, which they had been following through the ages, happen to known as Hinduism. Orthodox Hindu code of conduct places emphasis primarily on two qualities in human being, which also distinguish him from the animals and the low life character. These are education (vidya) and proper social and religious conduct or ritualistic manner (acharana). The latter is important to personification or giving shape to such excellent qualities as inner balance, refinement and polished and civilized behaviour in the society. This is the introductory part of any society and key to know about the characteristics of that society and in this part of religious ritual, the devotee has freedom to choose where to place the devotion. Ritual are defined as the rules of life or a method to work through appropriate and prescribed manners. Ritual is prescribed by the religion or by the tradition of community according to their devotion and in ones religious faith ritual plays a very important role. It can be taken to signify several things, a religious or solemn ceremony that involves a series of actions performed according to a set order. In other words, ritual is a discipline of norms. Besides this, ritual makes the man virtuous and wise and wise people make the society regimented. There are some special rituals behind every work and when the work is performed in appropriate manner, it always brings good and positive results. In simple words, ritual can be defined as the technique of doing any work with some specific and prescribed rules, which are prevalent in the society from the very past time and are valuable because of its excellent nature and positive domino effects. Not only religion, but ritual also play important role in political, social interaction, economic and cultural life of any society. It has been considered as the manners of working or completion of duty. Ritual is a set of actions performed mainly for their symbolic value. It may be prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of community. The term ritual usually excludes action which are arbitrarily chosen by the performers, or dictated purely by logic, chance and necessarily. It may be performed on specific occasion or at the discretion of individuals or communities. It may be performed by a single individual, by group, or by the entire community in arbitrary places or in the places specially reserved for it. A ritual may be restricted to a certain subset of the community and may enable or underscore the passage between religious or social status. The purpose of ritual is varied; with religious obligations or ideals, satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioners, strengthening of social bonds, social and moral education, demonstration of respect or submission, stating one's affiliation, obtaining social acceptance or approval for some event, or sometimes just for the pleasure of the ritual itself. Rituals of various types are a feature of almost all known human societies past or present. These include the social and religious rituals. Religious ritual includes not only various worship rites and sacraments of organized religions and cult but also the rites of passage of certain societies, atonements and purifications rites oath of allegiance, dedication ceremonies, coronations and presidential inaugurations, marriage, and funerals. On the other part, many activities that are ostensibly performed for concrete purposes, such as jury trials, executions of criminals and scientific symposium are loaded with purely symbolic actions prescribed by regulations or traditions and thus partly ritualistic in nature are the social rituals. Rituals are accepted as the behaviour of the society. In this, common action like hello, namaste, jule, satsrikar, pranam, is also a part of ritual as these are continuous tradition of a civilized society. These are the common rituals prevalent in the society and a particular community has some special types of rules and rituals, which they perform without reverence, rituals can have more basics, social functions in expressing, fixing and reinforcing

the shared values and beliefs of a society. In India, the practice of ritualistic worship is deep rooted in the socio-cultural life of Hindus and it reflects their basic philosophy of life. The examples of the ritualistic practices of people in ancient Indian society were found on the walls of caves and temples. The intellectual mass of India has been performing the religious rites like worship, yajna, homa, dana, snana, dhyana, and japa from time immemorial of which yajna, homa and dana are accepted as prominent. Their prominence is clearly visualized in the ritual (karmakanda), portion of the Vedas. These are the basics of perfect life of the Hindus. An individual with the knowledge of Vedic ritual is pandit or the performer of rituals. In the Vedas, religion is found in the form of sacrifices. It has been prescribed as duty of each householder to achieve all the means of worldly prosperity and after that goal for heaven.¹ Through rituals one pay gratitude to universe for what we have. The literary works of the Vedic period and thereafter had mentioned the different ways of paying gratitude to the heavenly deities, with the spirit of being thankful to what we have. In the current work, focus is on the religious rituals; specially performed to the worship of Naga or surpent. Himachal Pradesh is known as Dev Bhumi, (the abode of god)ⁱ which stands for the land of gods and goddesses. In the Skanda Purana it is said, “He, who thinks of Himachal, though he should not behold him, is greater than he who performs all worship in Kashi.” “As the dew is dried up by the morning Sun, so are the sins of mankind by the sight of Himachal. It is washed away through the vision of this land.

There is hardly any evidence, which could give us any definite details of the beliefs and faiths of the people proceeding the centuries of the Mauryan period. Nevertheless, various myths and stories of gods and goddesses given in the later brahmanical and non-brahmanical literary works go back to the Vedic, Upanisadic and the Epic periods. Of the various religious sects, four have played important role in the period between the sixth and the fourteenth centuries. These are Saivism, Śakta, Vaisnavism and Buddhism. Generally, in Himachal Pradesh the Divine belief is centered in the following manner:

- 1. ManuhhDevthiye (euq’; nsork)** or the Gods who were human beings at one point of time and are worshipped as pious spirits in the villages.
- 2. UpneoreDeothiye (Lo;EHkw nsork)** or the deities who emerged from natural phenomena, without being in body form, earlier to their manifestation and people gave them human shape and started to worship them according to their cultural belief.

The Himalayan Mountain has been a source of spiritual inspiration for the sages and mediators where the Śiva’, ‘Sakti’ and their representatives deities are the most common religious characters worshiped by the people.

The Naga cult or snake worship is among the oldest and most widespread forms of religious practices in that the world. In the minds of the early men there were a fear of the nature and powerful animals, with a feeling that they were stronger and wiser than him, or in short: uncanny. This was esp. true of the snake because of its swift, mysterious, yet graceful gliding movements without possessing any feet or wings, its fascinating eyes, the power to disappear swiftly, shedding of its skin which gave a sign of immortality, and the deadly consequences of its bite.² All these characteristics

²Monipal Bose Dey. “sanke , nag worship in india ” culture spirituality Travel, 2021

produced mixed feelings of fascination, fear and respect, which led to the start of serpent worship, and a subject of many myths and folktales. In the cults that worship animals, such as the Naga cult worshipping serpents, there is generally found among its followers a strong belief in the animal's magical powers, beneficence, healing powers, wisdom, and the possession of secret higher knowledge. In the ancient world snake worship was popular and universally practiced in Arabia, Persia, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Italy, Greece, in many parts of northern and Western Europe, the current Latin American nations, China, Sri Lanka, and Japan.³

Study area

Pangi valley (location): has unique geography which strongly influences its climate and subsequently its geographical diversity culture and flora and fauna. Pangi is the remotest, rugged, snow bound, inaccessible, land-locked but picturesque and pristine narrow river valley in Himachal Pradesh. It is a small administrative subdivision of Chamba district situated in the northern extreme of the state where time and space acquired a new dimension. Sandwiched between two mighty mountain ranges, the Zaskar in the North and the Pir panjal in the south it is an isolated valley. Pangi valley extends between latitude 32° 46' 36'' north and 33° 10' 46'' north of the equator and between longitudes 76° 23' 33'' east and 76° 54' 59'' east of the Greenwich mean time.⁴

Naga cult in western Himalaya

The Naga cult in the Western Himalaya region holds significant cultural and religious importance. The cult revolves around the worship of serpent deities, often seen as protectors and bringers of fertility. This belief system is closely tied to the indigenous communities' traditions and rituals. In the Western Himalayas, including regions like Himachal Pradesh, Jammu Kashmir, and Uttarakhand, the Naga cult is often linked with agricultural practices, as serpents are associated with water sources necessary for farming. The cult's history likely spans generations, and its rituals and stories have been transmitted orally over time. It's important to note that the Naga cult's practices and beliefs can vary between different communities and regions within the Western Himalaya. If you're interested in exploring this topic further, consulting local experts, anthropologists, or historical records specific to the area would provide more detailed insights.

Naga cult in India

The Naga cult assumed special importance in India, and unlike the other nations it took a more developed form with many interesting variations, and was also more widely distributed. India is also a country which always had a wide distribution of a variety of snakes, and the large number of deaths that took place from their venomous bites explains why the serpents or Nagas were feared, respected, and worshipped from prehistoric era.

The Naga cult communities of the ancient India occupy an important place in Indian history. Snake worship and Naga cult is one of the most ancient forms of the worship in India has been

³*Ibid,pp*

⁴ Janam Singh Thakur "Fairs and Festival of Pangi Tribal Tehsil" *International Journal of Social Science and Economics Invention*, Volume 05, Issue 05 May 2019, pp 63–66.

reported from the archaeological excavation at Chirand, a Neolithic site in Bihar. Among the host of terracotta figurines of animals and birds found at Chirand, the discovery of the terracotta figurine of a snake is very significant. The excavator has identified this terracotta figurine as the earliest representation of the Naga cult dating back to the early part of the 3rd millennium B.C. However, the prevalence and popularity of the Naga cult during the early historic period (3rd-4th century B.C.) has been reported from Maniyar Math near Rajgir.⁵ The emergence of this cult in India has been traced back to the Harappan age in two seals where it appears in an attitude of devotion to a figure in yogic posture, possibly a god- an early anticipation of the close association of serpents with Saiva (and Sakti) cult of the later cult.⁶

The antiquities dating back to the first century A.D. and the literary references amply testify to the fact that Naga worship was prevalent and popular throughout the length and breadth of India from Mathura to Kerala.⁷

Orissa, the famous seat of diverse religions was also an important centre of Naga worship from very early time. The earliest representation of the snake motif in Orissan art has been reported from the painted rock-shelters of Sundargarh. In the rock shelters of Manikmoda, Lekhamoda and Tongo, there is the enigmatic depiction of snake in engravings as well as in paintings of monochrome dark red (haematite) and bichrome red and white. The continuity of the worship and festivities connected with Naga in Orissa can be traced as far back as 1st century A.D. With the accession of emperor Kharavela Orissa witnessed a glorious epoch in art, architecture and sculpture in unbroken continuity. The antiquities discovered so far during this period unmistakably prove the prevalence and popularity in Naga worship in Orissa.⁸

Literary References

First literal evidence related to Naga cult in Kashmir is found in the Mahayamsha. It is said that Asoka's adviser MoggaliputtaTissa sent Majjhantika to preach Buddhism in Kashmir. When the shramana reached the valley, he found that Aravala, the king of the Nagas, was ruling over it. Aravala was destroying the corns of the country by hail storm. Majjhantika, however, due to his divine powers remained unaffected from rains and storms. This made the Naga king furious who sent lightning and struck rocks against the Buddhist monk in herder to kill him. But all these went in vain. Then convinced of the great powers of Majjhantika, the Naga king Aravala together with their followers submitted before the monk and accepted Buddhism. This was followed by the conversion into Buddhism a large number of Naga worshippers of Kashmir and Gandhara. Apart from this, there are plenty of other references as well.⁹

⁵Pradhan, Biswajit. "THE HISTORY OF NAGA CULT AND NAGA FESTIVALS IN ORISSA." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 62, 2001, pp. 149–59

⁶ Dr. Pooja Prashar. . "Naga Worship in Ancient Kashmir" *International Journal of Research* , Volume 05 Issue 04February 2018, pp. 2571–2579 .

⁷Pradhan, Biswajit.op.cit., p.159.

⁸Ibid,pp

⁹ Dr. Pooja Prashar. . "Naga Worship in Ancient Kashmir" *International Journal of Research* , Volume 05 Issue 04February 2018, pp. 2571–2579 .

Foreigners' References

Hiuen Tsang, who visited Kashmir in the 7th century CE, relates that according to the native records, Kashmir was originally a dragon lake. A very detailed and vivid account of how the Arhat Madhyantika (Majjhantika) rescued the valley of Kashmir from the Naags, established there the religion of the Buddha and settled five hundred arhats in the country has been preserved in the Chinese Vinaya of the Mula- Sarvasti-vadin sect.¹⁰

Naga cult in Himachal Pradesh

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.¹¹The worship of Nagas (serpent deities) has been a significant part of the religious and cultural landscape in various parts of India, including Himachal Pradesh. Naga worship often involves the veneration of snake deities for blessings, protection, and fertility. In Himachal Pradesh, many villages and communities have their own Nag temples or shrines, often located near water bodies, as snakes are associated with water and fertility. The historical origins of the Naga cult in Himachal Pradesh can be traced back to the amalgamation of local beliefs, tribal traditions, and Hinduism. Some areas, such as the Kullu Valley, are known for their Naga rituals and festivals. The Naggar Castle near Manali is a notable site associated with Naga worship. In the past, Naga worship might have been more prevalent, especially in tribal communities, as a way to connect with nature and seek protection from various natural and supernatural forces. Over time, as the region underwent cultural and religious shifts, the Naga cult might have evolved and integrated into mainstream religious practices. For a more detailed and accurate understanding of the Naga cult's history in Himachal Pradesh, I recommend consulting local historians, scholars, or resources dedicated to the cultural and religious heritage of the region.

Naga cult in chamba

Naag cult has a significant historical and cultural presence in the Chamba region of India, particularly in Himachal Pradesh. The Naag cult is primarily centered around the worship of serpents, which are considered sacred beings in Hindu mythology. In Chamba, this cult is deeply ingrained in the local traditions and religious practices. The worship of snakes, or Naag Puja, is believed to have ancient roots in the region, dating back to prehistoric times. Snakes are revered as protectors of fertility, agriculture, and natural resources, and their worship is often associated with rituals aimed at seeking their blessings for prosperity and well-being. In Chamba, various temples and shrines dedicated to Naag Devatas (serpent deities) can be found, where devotees offer prayers, perform rituals, and make offerings such as milk, flowers, and incense to appease the serpentine gods. The Naag cult also finds expression in local art, folklore, and festivals, reflecting its deep

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp

¹¹ Sunny Kumar. "THE CULTS OF NAG DEITIES IN THE SHIVALIK HILLS ." *The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal (A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9)*, , Volume 06 Issue 05 oct2020, pp. 74–79

cultural significance in the region. Overall, the Naag cult history in Chamba is intertwined with the religious and cultural fabric of the community, serving as a symbol of reverence for nature and the divine forces believed to govern it.

Naga cult in Pangl Valley

The Naga cult has a rich history in the Pangl Valley, known for its unique cultural practices and beliefs. The Naga cult often involves the worship of serpent deities and is deeply intertwined with the Pangwal tribal communities' way of life. The history of the Naga cult in Pangl Valley likely spans generations, with rituals, stories, and traditions passed down through oral history.

In Pangl Valley Naag temples are known as Dehar. Around them a small verandah is provided. The roofs which are made of wooden sleepers are always slanting on the sides. On the top of the roof, tarshools of the deity called likhtar and gaja are fixed. In the front of the verandah several bells are hung. On the wooden portion between the slanting roofs beautiful wooden carving is done. The walls also bear stone inscriptions.¹²

As is customary in this region, the temples are constructed by the aiyas. And once they are completed no further repairs are carried out. If the temple building is decrepited it is pulled down, and reconstructed. In such cases generally the deity itself bids for the construction of a new abode through its chaila. Every deity has a separate pujara and a chai/a. Both of them are appointed by the deity. The function of the pujara is to perform the puja in the temple, and the chaila prophesies to the devotees on the deity's day¹³

Temple management

The temples are looked after by the Pangawal people of the village. The praja appoints a pujara who performs day to day worship of the deity. Only the Brahmms or Rajputs are permitted to become pujaras. At the death of the pujara his son or a nearest relative can become the next pujara. The chaila of the deity is appointed in the same manner as the pujara. The pujara is entitled to take away eatables offered to the deity. A char, who is generally Rajput or Brahmin by caste is appointed by the praja for all the temples under its jurisdiction. He takes away the temple funds and hands it over to the praja. These funds are utilised for purchasing articles for the temple. When devotees sacrifice goats to the deity, the pujara gets the left leg and the liver of the goat. Half of the remaining portion goes to the praja and the other half to the devotee offering the sacrifice.¹⁴

¹² R.C.Singh , A village survey Monograph Kupha, Parmas, Malet, census of India, 1961 Himachal Pradesh ,vol xx, part ,vii (Delhi Manager of Publications, 1972)

¹³ *Ibid, pp*

¹⁴ *Ibid, pp*

A list of the articles used in the Naag temple are

TABLE

Articles	Description
Bainch	Flute
Chain	Also called Kanchaie. It is a musical instrument made of silver.
Diya	Lamp made of brass
Dhol	Drums
Ghanti	Bell , made of brass
chormooth	Awhisk made of yak tail hair
Marchoole	A fan made of pea cock feathers
Nagar	Drums
Narsing	A musical instrument made of silver
Shankh	Chonch
Turi	Alslo called narshaani . A musical instrument made of silver

Some Important Naag Temples in Pangi valley

Handsar naag cult

Hansan naag is an important deity in the killar village and is worshipped at time of drought. In summer month when the villagers do not have any rain they all go in a group to Handsar Naag , headed by an arya beating the drum , and worship the deity by sacrificing a goat in the temple . This deity is also worshipped during the famous fulyatra jatra each year¹⁵ .

Bheer naag worship

There are three temples in Sahali village including two snake temples and one dedicated to Bheer Nag Devta is considered as the major deity of the village. Bheer Nag Devta is believed to have seven faces. People believe that the snakes protect fields and keep green by destroying animals and harmful reptiles etc. Thus it keeps land much fertile. The people of the Sahali village celebrate

¹⁵ Des raj ,village kariyas Teh Pangi ,Distt Chamba ,Age 65 year 1/09/2023

festivals vis-à-vis Ujjwadi in the month of sawan and Satyalu in Magh to worship their Naag devta. The temple of Bheer Naag Devta was renovated during the reign of Lalit Varman, the king of Chamba. According to sahali panghat shilalekh ludar pal was the rana of sahali in 1170 Ad. Therefore, the temple is renovated after every decade and this process known as Dehar in the local dialect.¹⁶

Singhbaan Naag Devta

The temple of Singhbaan Naag Devta is situated in village Punto, about six miles farther across the river Chanderbhaga. Every year in the month of Asvina a big fair is organised here.

Naag Devta kawas

This Naag Devta is another deity and is worshipped for the protection of cattle against diseases. The temple of Naag is situated in village Kawas about three miles away. Every year in Vaisakha a fair is organised here and people from far off places come to participate.

Navkund Naag

The temple of Navkund Devta is situated in Hudan about eight miles away. Every year in Bhadra a fair is held here, and villagers from distant places come to attend.



Figure 1 Bheer nag temple sahali

¹⁶M.P Rana ,village Sahali Teh Pangi ,Distt Chamba ,Age 37 year 1/08/2023

Jaharyu naag

The temple of jaharyu naga is situated in sural village in pangi . jaharyu Nag Devta is considered as the major deity of the village. Jaharyu naag People believe that the snake keeps our fields green by destroying animals, reptiles etc. this deity is also worshipped during the famous Nagahoai jatra each year .¹⁷

Kudayu naag

Nag devta resides in the hills of Kudhio and Pangwalis worship him as Lord Shiva. The Shivling is covered with snow for the whole year and looks mesmerizing. People have a faith that due to unfavourable geographical and environmental conditions none can reach at the top of this Shivling or hill. There is immense reverence and faith in the serpent god in Sural, Hundan and Killar areas.¹⁸

Padayar naag

This naag devta is another deity and is worshipped for the protection of cattle against diseases the temple is situated in the village kawas in Pangni about three miles away. Every year in vaisakha a fair is organised here and people from far off places come to participate.

Dehant Naag

Dehant Naag is an important deity in Killar villages and is worshipped at the time of drought. In summer months when the villagers do not have any rain (which is a common feature of this place as the villages lie in arid zone of inner Himalaya where monsoon seldom penetrate) they all go in a group to Dehant Naag, headed by an arya beating the drum, and worship the deity by sacrificing a goat in the temple. This deity is also worshipped during the famous Phool Jatra each year. There is a very interesting legend narrated Pangni as to how Dehant Naag came to Killar. It is stated that formerly the temple of Dehant Naag was located in the village Jhalma of Punjab Lahul. There every year, the villagers used- to sacrifice one man out of them to this deity. They had fixed the turn and one man from each house used to be taken for sacrifice on the deity (Jas da)'. In this village there lived an old widow who had seven sons. Her six sons had already been sacrificed in the temple. When this incident occurred it was the turn of her seventh and the last child. She was very sad. While preparing mandays which her son had to carry with him the following morning she was weeping bitterly. Meanwhile a shepherd by the name of Kithu appeared in this Village. That day he had covered a long distance and was dead tired. He wanted to have a long rest. Besides looking for shelter he was also searching for food, since the exertion of the long journey had made him very hungry. When he went past the old woman's house, the smell of mandays stimulated his hunger all the more. Without a moment's hesitation he decided to seek shelter there. But when he entered the house he was dismissed

¹⁷Babu Ram ,village sural Teh Pangni ,Distt Chamba ,Age 57 year 2/08/2023

¹⁸Ram Lok ,village Thamho Teh Pangni ,Distt Chamba ,Age 32 year 3/08/2023

old lady in tears. After a few minutes' silence he enquired from the old lady as to what was the matter. Through her sobs she narrated the entire story of how her last son would be sacrificed the following day. It is said that Kithu Gaddi, on hearing the tale of woe of the old lady, was moved. He volunteered himself to be sacrificed in place of her last son. Naturally this made the old lady very happy. Soon this news spread like wild fire through the whole village. That night Kithu Gaddi was sumptuously fed. The following morning Kithu Gaddi was taken to the Devta's temple in a procession. All the way he was quite cheerful, and when he reached the temple he stopped at the altar and pointing towards the deity told the people that if he was a genuine Devta let him eat him up instead of his being sacrificed by others in his (the Devta's) name. The villagers agreed to his suggestion. After this he went towards the deity and offered first his hands and then his head to be devoured by the Devta. When for a long time nothing happened to him he again addressed the village gathering, saying that this was a false deity and all of them had been fools to give him human sacrifices. He further told them that it was his moral duty to free the villagers from the charm of that false Devta. Uttering these words he rushed into the temple and collecting the stolie image of the deity hurled it into the river Chanderbhaga. It was in this manner that the villagers of Ihalma got rid of this Devta. Now starts the second part of the story. When the image of Dehant Naag was thrown into the river. it went. on rolling in the currents of the Chanderbhaga and finally reached the banks where Kilar is situated today. It is said that a Pangwal woman used to graze her cattle near the river bank. For some days one of her choories had not yielded any milk when milked at home. This had been the cause of good amount of rebukes to the woman from the other members of her house, because they all accused her that it was she who had been drinking the milk from the choori during the day. This made the Pangwalen very angry and worried and she decided to keep a firm watch upon that choori. When she took out her cattle for grazing. she purposely tied a long rope to the neck of choori to see where she went and

who sucked her milk. All of a sudden she found that a big stone image came out of the water and started sucking the milk from choori's teats. The Pangwaleu who was watching it dashed on to the scene and with a big scold enquired from the stone who it was and why it had been sucking the milk from her choori. The sudden appearance of the Pangwalen startled the image and it immediately vanished into the water. After some time it again raised its head and enquired from the Pangwalen whether Kithu Gaddi was there? The Pangwalen replied that there was no man near by this name and nor she knew one and insisted upon knowing the identity of the stone. The stone image came out of the water and told the Pangwalen that he was Dehant Naag and requested her to carry him towards Kilar. He further told her that in the process of carrying him as soon as he became heavy, she should put him down which for times to come would become his future abode. It is said that on hearing the identity of the image. the Pangwalen was terrified out of her wits. but finding no way out she put it on her back and started towards Kilar. On the way it became so light that she did not have to exert much to carry it. However. as the distance to Kilar was quite long she had to sit at three places to take a bit of rest. This image was first placed at Chulsaru. then at Ludhag. and finally at Hunsaan. Here it became so heavy that she could not carry it any further. It was then deposited there which became its abode. Gradually the villagers also constructed its temple there. To repay her for carrying it to Hunsaan. the Devta asked her for a wish she would like to be granted. The Pangwalen, it is said, was so over-whelmed that for some time she could not decide what to ask for. For several years she

had not been able to go to the Phool jatra since like all other days this day also. she was confronted with the problem of grazing her cattle. As such she begged the Devta to fulfill her this wish so that she could witness the jatra. Dehant Naag willingly granted this wish. It is said that since that time on the day of the Phool jatra, each year. all the Pangwals free their cattle early in the morning and they return home in the evening after grazing in the jungle without any harm done to them. In this way all the villagers can witness the jatra. ¹⁹

Navkund naag

The temple of Navkund naag Devta in situated in Hundan village .Every year in Bhadra a fair and worshipped held here,and villagers from distant place come to attend. ²⁰

Manei Nagani

The temple of Manei Nagani devi in situated in thandal village in Pangi valley . This deity is also worshipped during the famous manei mela each year. In summer month when the villagers do not have any rain they all go in a group to, Nagani headed by an arya beating the drum , and worship the deity by sacrificing a male sheep in the temple .²¹



Figure 2 Manei Nagani sheela handal

¹⁹ R.C.Singh , A village survey Monograph Kupha,Parmas,Malet,census of India, 1961 Himachal Pradesh ,vol xx, part ,vii (Delhi Manager of Publications,1972

²⁰ Ramesh kumar ,village Hudan Teh Pangi ,Distt Chamba ,Age 40 year 4/08/2023

²¹Raj kumar ,village Purthi Teh Pangi ,Distt Chamba ,Age 47 year 5/08/2023

Fairs and festivals

The Pangwalas generally worship Naag Devat and Shiva. So every now and then fairs are held at the temples of Nagani , Nag and Shiva.

The following are the chief fairs/ festivals observed in Pangl

Bishu

This is celebrated on the first Baisakh when Sanj (small wheaten cakes cooked in ghee) incense, vermilion, flowers, rice, ghee and gur are offered to Naga devta , and at night relatives and friends are feasted, and drinking of liquor (arakh) is freely indulged in.

Uttrain

Uttrain This festival is celebrated in the month of Pausa, and all households worship their ancestors. Early in the morning, water is sprinkled on the backs of all the goats and sheep reared by a household in the name of the village Nag Devta . If they shiver it is taken to mean that the deity is happy with the house- hold, but if the reverse happens the household presumes that the deity is angry with them and a goat or sheep is sacrificed in the temple of the deity.

Fulyach

This is the most popular fair. The literal meaning of Fulyach is to mix up freely, and this actually happens on this day. Both men and women mix up freely and hold great rejoicings. The Fulyach begins in the month of Kartika each year in Kupha and is held for four days. Men and women from the distant villages Dharwas, Hundan and Suraal also take part. Each day it starts from nine in the morning and continues till five in the evening. In all about one thousand persons participate. From eleven to four in the evening, men organise themselves into groups to perform the sain which they dance to the tune of a Mute and nagara, played by the Aryas. Stalls of sweet- meats, bangle sellers and miscellaneous articles are put up.

On the fourth day, all the participants come to Chauki and hold a dance there. On the fifth day the fair is concluded by offering puja to Dehant Naag-the village deity. The devotees sacrifice goats and sheep.

This Fulyach jatra is the last fair of the year and after this the region has heavy snowfall and the villagers cannot meet each other again for some time. So,before the start of this fair. Villagers go to their relatives and wish them to remain in good health throughout the winter by saying matha matha beero. The young members touch the feet of the elders. Luchis. ghee, cheena and meat are also exchanged. During the course of Fulyach , delicious meals are cooked in every house. Wine is excessively consumed. In this fair, men dance during the day, while women dance in the evening.

Iwaan

This jatra is held in Dharwas, about ten miles away. The fair is celebrated in Magha and Phalguna each year. It continues for three days, first day it used to be for the Raja (now-a-days it is also held in the name of praja), the second day for the praja, and third day for Naag Devta. No other

devta is worshipped in this jatra. About 500 to 600 persons from distant villages participate. Sweet and other shops are put up and miscellaneous articles are sold. During the day, the men dance to the tune of flutes, nagora and drums and women repeat it in the evening.

Unoni

This fair is held in Chaitra and takes place at four places-Luj, Sural. Karuni and Kariyas where Sheetla Devi, Shakti Devi, Jaharyu naag, Malasni Mata and Baleen Basna are worshipped. It also remains for three days. During the day, the men keep on dancing, and in the evening, the women dance in their villages. Delicious meals are prepared in each house and are taken with wine.

Sainch

This fair is held in Chaitra in Karuni, and remains only for just a day. During the day villagers worship Naag devta, Malasni Mata and offer sacrifices of goats and sheep. In the evening, they get down to dancing. About four to five hundred persons participate.

Daikhan

This fair is held in Hundan on 3rd and 4th Shravana every year. During the day villagers worship Navkund naag, Kudayu naag and offer sacrifices of goats and sheep.

On 3rd it is celebrated in an open compound which is about a mile and a half away from Hundan. There is a small tank in the middle and people assemble around it. On the 4th it shifts to the village. This is a Bhote fair, but Pangwals also participate. The gathering soars to 500 or more. Main characteristic of this fair is that men and women dance together or side by side.

Khaul / Chajgi

This festival is celebrated on puranmashi of Pausa. At about six in the evening, all members go to their fields, nearby water-heads, dhaj and dhoch with burning Dalpotee/ jagni and offer puja to them. Thereafter they assemble at a fixed place and also bring with them two special burning Dalpotee which in local dialect are called as masharas. One mashara each is placed in the centre to worship Naag devta. When it is over, the villagers pick up their second masharas, and go to the Devi temple. At this stage, the aryas also accompany the procession, beating the drums all the way. Here villagers offer puja. and then with these masharas, they return to the ground in chauki and hold great celebration.

After the programme is over, villagers return to their houses, accompanied with burning masharas, which are later thrown on a walnut tree. It is said that if a maliara gets stuck on the tree the thrower will get a son. otherwise a daughter. In the evening, every house prepares meat which is the speciality of this festival.

Shirwat or Shriwach

Shirwat or Shriwach is the same as Shivratri and is held in Phagun by fasting, food being eaten only in the evening. Fried swet, milk, ghee and butter milk (Chhach) are offered to Shiva and then eaten to break the fast.

Sheel

This festival is celebrated on the day or amarwash of Phalguna or Chaitra. Villagers hold great rejoicings, since they were very much wearied with the snow. This festival heralds the spring season and the fear of snow is banished. All the villagers get up early in the morning, and cook meant and by sprinkling water on the back of sheep and goats they see whether any village deity is angry with them or not. Spinning is suspended till Pareed the next festival.

Every household takes ghee and chapaties in the morning. At about eleven meat is taken with cheena and mandays. At about four in the evening rehani is taken which consists of halwa, manday and ghee. In the evening, at about seven or eight, every household burns an earthen lamp with ghee, and delicious meals prepared on this day are kept around it. As is customary in this region, these dishes are taken on pareed Thereafter the Baliraja/baldano raja is worshipped. In the evening pinani-a local dish prepared with bhagani and gur, is taken with ghee.

Pareed

This festival comes after the second day of sheel. The village deities are worshipped and then all the villagers meet and embrace one another. The eatables which were kept around the earthen lamp on the day of sheel are eaten on this day. Besides, the spinning which was temporarily suspended since Sheel, is resumed. At day break one male member of each house goes to the kailash, the local name of small stream, and brings water in the pots used for milking the cows. By doing so, it is believed that the cattle give more milk. Another feature of this festival is that goats and sheep are fed well. The villagers also visit their friends and take with them sattu, which Whey eat wishing each other takada asata n zee (May you be well).

Magal

It is celebrated after the third or filth day of pareed. The villagers make bakroos of atta, and totus of sattu, and visit their fields. This festival marks the restarting of all agricultural activities which had been abandoned due to the heavy snowfall of the winter. Therefore, on this day, a portion of the field is cleared by removing the snow, and ploughed. When this is over, the villagers sit together and eat all the things they had brought from their homes.

Jaach(jattras)

The people in Pangi like their counterparts in other hilly areas essentially are merry and light hearted. Being geographically isolated, people have devised their own ways of amusement and entertainment. People have enough time especially in winters to engage themselves in such activities. They have means to keep themselves merrily busy without much expenditure **Jaach** are one such mode of entertainment which is prevalent from times immemorial. The people assemble, drink, dance, sing and walk over to the nearest temple or other common places in the village. The chief **Jaach** are held at Mindhal and Hudan The one is called pineeyach. The **Jaach** at Hudan is observed in the month of June while at Mindhal in September. In winters also, Jattras are organised in almost all the villages. The people neither are unaware of the historical background of these jattras nor are there any evidence regarding their origin.

The inhabitants do not indulge in any exhibition or gaiety of a marked variety during these yatras. Leaving aside a drinking spree, singing and rhythmic cavorting to music, no distinguished festivity marks the occasion. This has been the traditional custom of celebrating these joyous occasions which probably will carry on in the same vein unless there is an intermingling of cultures which is likely to occur only when the roads connect the valley with the outside world.

The natives of Pangni valley celebrate a number of fairs and festivals that have mythological significance in different seasons with great fervour and thank the various Naga devta for making them survive harsh winters. Among these festivals and fairs are nagoei mela ,ujjadi mela , etc. vesh festival is celebrated to reopen the closed Naga temples due to snowfall in winters while and Jukaru is a thanks giving to local Nag and deities for helping inhabitants survive harsh winters. A place named 'Rakshas tal'²² which holds a mythological significance that a devil carved his foot and formed a lake holds a special place as people organize a fair every year and dance around this spot in traditional attire. Hadsar nag Bheer nag, Jaharyu nag, is the local deities of the Pangni region and is a place of historical significance.^{23,24}

Conclusion

Snake worship is one of the most ancient form of the worship in pangni valley. The Naga cult has a rich history in the Pangni Valley, known for its unique cultural practices and beliefs. The Naga cult often involves the worship of serpent deities and is deeply intertwined with the Pangwal tribal community's way of life. The people of Pangni valley celebrate a number of fairs and festivals that have mythological significance in different seasons with great fervour and thank the various Naga devta for making them survive harsh winters. Among these festivals and fairs are Fulayach, nagoei mela ,ujjadi mela , Sheel Pareed etc. . Hadsar nag Bheer nag, Jaharyu nag, Dosar nag ,kudayu nag, padayar nag , Manei Nagani is the local deities of the Pangni region and is a place of historical significance. In summer month when the villagers do not have any rain they all go in a group to, naag devta headed by an arya beating the drum , and worship the deity by sacrificing a male sheep/gote in the temple .

Bibliography

Primary sources

Interview

1. Des raj ,village kariyas Teh Pangni ,Distt Chamba ,Age 65 year 1/09/2023
2. M.P Rana ,village Sahali Teh Pangni ,Distt Chamba ,Age 37 year 1/08/2023
3. Babu Ram ,village sural Teh Pangni ,Distt Chamba ,Age 57 year 2/08/2023
4. Ram Lok ,village Thamoh Teh Pangni ,Distt Chamba ,Age 32 year 3/08/2023
5. Ramesh kumar ,village Hudan Teh Pangni ,Distt Chamba ,Age 40 year 4/08/2023

²² Bhatt, A., Rana, D., Uniyal, S.K., Kumar, A. and Lal, B. "BIODIVERSITY, TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE NATIVE PEOPLE OF PANGNI VALLEY, CHAMBA DISTRICT, H.P.." *Processing International biodiversity* , Volume 5, Dehardun pp. 1-6.

²³ Chatar Singh ,village shour Teh Pangni ,Distt Chamba ,Age 47 year 5/08/2023

²⁴ Bharti, K.R. (1995). Pangni and Pangwalas, P.L Printer, Ludhiana, 1995

6. Raj kumar ,village Purthi Teh Pangi ,Distt Chamba ,Age 47 year 5/08/2023

Secondary sources

1. Parihar, S. (2019). Rituals; Doctrines of Devtionand Sacrifices in Sakta Cult.Agam Kala Praksashan.
2. Fergusson, J. (1873). Tree and Serpent Worship. London.
3. Vogel, J.P. (1926). Indian Serpent Lore, London.
4. Cunningham, A. (1879). The Stupa of Bharhut, London.
5. Smith, V.A. (1907). Catalogue of the coins of the Indian Museum, Calcutta.
6. Vasu, N.N. (1912). Archeological Survey of Mayurbhanja, Vol.I, Calcutta.
7. Agrawala, V.S. (1970). Ancient Indian Folk Cults, New Delhi.
8. Rao, TAG (1914). Hindu temple iconography.
9. Handa, O. C., (2004). Naga Cults and Traditions in the Western Himalayas, Delhi: Indus Publishing Company.
10. Bose Dey ,Monipal. (2021). “snake , nag worship in India ” culture spirituality Travel, 2021
11. Singh ,Mian Goverdhan.(2010). Himachal Pradesh; History Culture and Economy, Menerva Book Depot, Shimla.
- 12.¹ Bhatt, A., Rana, D., Uniyal, S.K., Kumar, A. and Lal, B. “BIODIVERSITY, TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE NATIVE PEOPLE OF PANGI VALLEY, CHAMBA DISTRICT, H.P..” Processing International biodiversity , Volume 5, Dehardun pp. 1–6.
13. Prashar, Pooja . (2018). “Naga Worship in Ancient Kashmir” International Journal of Research , Volume 05 Issue 04February .
14. Kumar. Sunny(2019). “ THE CULTS OF NAG DEITIES IN THE SHIVALIK HILLS .” The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal (A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 3.9), , Volume 06 Issue 05 oct2020, pp. 74–79
15. Biswajit, Pradhan’ (2001). “THE HISTORY OF NAGA CULT AND NAGA FESTIVALS IN ORISSA.” Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, vol. 62.
16. Thakur Janam Singh, (2019). “Fairs and Festival of Pangi Tribal Tehsil”International Journal of Social Science and Economics Invention, Volume 05, Issue 05 May .
17. Bharti, K.R. (1995). Pangi and Pangwalas, P.L Printer, Ludhiana.
18. Singh,R.C.(1971).A village survey Monogrph Kupha,Parmas,Malet,census of India, 1961 Himachal Pradesh ,vol xx, part ,vii (Delhi Manager of Publications,

ⁱ Mian Goverdhan Singh, Himachal Pradesh; *History Culture and Economy*, Menerva Book Depot, Shimla, 5th edition, 2010, p. 1