

Naga Cults and Traditions in the Western Himalaya



O.C. HANDA

Naga Cults
and
Traditions
in the
Western Himalaya

O.C. Handa



INDUS
PUBLISHING COMPANY

Plate number 13 is reproduced from *Indian Serpent Lore* by J.Ph. Vogel; plates at numbers 12, 14 and 15 are by courtesy of Gagan Khanna, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba; plates at numbers 39-42, 45-50 are by courtesy of my friend Peter van Ham, Germany; and plates at numbers 43 and 44 are by courtesy of my friend C.L. Kashyap of Shimla. The contribution is gratefully acknowledged.

Call No. 306.09547
Acc. No. 3958

Copyright © 2004 O.C. Handa

ISBN 81-7387-161-2

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without written permission of the publisher

Published by M.L. Gidwani, Indus Publishing Company
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi 110 027, and printed at
B.B.N. Printers, Najafgarh Road Indl. Area, New Delhi

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	7
1. Geophysical Panorama	17
2. Socio-Cultural Scenario	36
3. Genesis of Naga Cult in the Western Himalaya	80
4. Naga as the Master of the Subterranean	107
5. Naga as the Lord of Weather	140
6. Naga as the Terrific God	206
7. Naga as the Patron God	285
8. The Anthropomorphized Hero	317
<i>Appendices</i>	
I. List of the Naga Temples in the Western Himalaya	336
II. List of the Mahasu Devta Temples in Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal	346
III. List of the Mahun Naga Temples in Himachal Pradesh	350
IV. List of the Gugga Shrines in the Western Himalaya	352
<i>Bibliography</i>	355
<i>Index</i>	358

Preface

Ophiolatry, under the various complexities of the racio-cultural fusion, had been one of the most primitive belief-systems in Indian mainland. It developed as a popular belief-system in the Western Himalayan interiors with the migration of people of the diverse ethnicity from the mainland. That process, though intermittent, had been continuing since the pre-historic times through the proto-historic periods until the late medieval period. The cult of Gugga and Mundlikh may be cited as the example in that regard. In the north India, the Austric people were the earliest propitiators of the snakes, for they had to tame the wild and marshy lands, infested with the deadly snakes, for cultivation. To seek relief, psychological of course, from the venomous reptiles, they naively deified them, and started appeasing them by offering sacrifices. Later in the process, when the Dravidians confronted them, ophiolatry found way in their belief-system also, but it occupied only the insignificant and secondary position. Eventually, when the Aryans colonised the north Indian plains, the earlier inhabitants, the Austric and Dravidians were pushed in the mountainous north and the wild east to find new habitats for them. That crisis, however, led the aggrieved people to coalesce into an Austro-Dravidian fraternity under the changed circumstances. It may be assumed that ophiolatry had become an established belief-system of that Austro-Dravidian milieu. And, when those people established themselves in the Himalayan foothills, the snake-cult assumed a definite form and significance.

In the later centuries, when the coalesced Austro-Dravidian communities encountered the earlier inhabitants of the Western

Himalayan interiors, the Khashas, and they could establish a tangible rapport between themselves, the belief-systems of those races underwent a unique metamorphism. The serpent-based belief-system of the Austro-Dravidians and the Ludra-based (Rudra) cultic practices of the Khasha syncretized to produce a quint-essential and ambivalent pantheistic system centred on the Ludra-Naga ideology. However, in the course of time, when the nomadic shepherding vocations gave way to the transhumant and the agrarian settled ways of living among the Khashas, Ludra confined to the high mountain passes, lost much of his relevance, and in certain instances, he even came to be defined as one of the Naga deities. Ludra (Rudra) Naga beyond Manikaran may be an example in this regard. On the other hand, Naga Devta emerged in importance among the people, for the agricultural prosperity depended upon his pleasure. He could manipulate the weather and control the natural sources of water. That may also explain why most of the Naga gods in the Western Himalayan interiors emerged from the agricultural fields, and were discovered mostly by the women folks. Quite a few of them also appeared in the pastures, while sucking cows' udders. How the honeybees came to be associated with the snakes, may be difficult to explain. Maybe, that the agriculture and apiculture have remained closely related to the each other to sustain living in the mountainous interiors, which gave rise to the belief that the snakes could transform into the honeybees at their will to provide bonus to their votaries for their faith in their supernatural propensities. In fact, in the mountainous interiors, honey had been the only traditional sweetening agent. Reason may be any, but we find some of the snake-gods closely related to the honeybees in some of the legends. One Naga god could at will transform himself into a honeybee and, thus, he came to be known as the Mahun Naga. His cult extended to the Shimla hills through the honeybees. We also learn from one of the legends of the *Atthara Kardu* of Kullu that they could transform themselves into the honeybees, which airlifted the *Jagati-paut* from the *Dram Dhanuk* to the Nagar castle. These factors would unmistakably associate ophiolatry with the agrarian living of the people.

The root-places, in the pasturelands, jungles and fields, where the Naga gods appeared originally, became sacred to the people. They improvised shrines at those sanctified places. Those shrines are known variously as the *dehra*, *deohra* or *deothi*, etc. in the local parlance. In some instances, the *dehras* developed into the magnificent structures of great artistic merit. In a *dehra*, a deity is represented by a stone or wooden image, crudely wrought to the human likeness. Sometime, only a shapeless stone idol (erroneously called as the *lingam*) serves that purpose. At time, iron rods or tridents, symbolising a snake are also placed alongside the wooden or stone image. On the *thalas* (votive platforms), one may find a good number of iron rods and tridents arranged to represent a Naga *Devta*. In the Doda district of Jammu & Kashmir and in the neighbouring Chamba such representations are the common sights.

All the celebrations related to the deity were consummated only in the precincts of the *dehra*. On such occasions, the deity would come on his *rath* in a procession from the *bhandar* and preside over the ceremony. Significant amongst such occasions is the annual fair dedicated to the deity. On all such community occasions or for thanksgiving on the fulfilment of a wish (locally called *manauti* or *jatra*), the people visit these *dehras*, for rest of the year these normally remain closed. Each of the Naga deities has his temple in the village. That is known as the *bhandar*, which literally means a treasury, a storehouse or a godown. In it, the trumpery face-images of the deity (locally called as the *mohras*) are enshrined. In the *bhandar*, besides the face-images, the *rath*, sacramental objects, jewellery and other valuables of the deity are kept. People visit the deity in the *bhandar* for their day-to-day problems. Under the Brahmanic influence, a daily *puja* (prayer) has also come into vogue in most of the *bhandars* of the Naga deities. However, the *pujari* performing the *puja* is as a rule a non-Brahman or a Khasha Brahman, and the *gur* or the spokesman of the deity is generally from the low caste.

To keep the Naga gods in good humour, the people devised diverse ways to propitiate them. Since, the Naga deities have essentially been demonic and revengeful in nature, they could not

be appeased by passive worship, but had to be propitiated with the animal sacrifices. The folklore of this region is replete with several instances, when the Naga Devta demanded human sacrifices. However, the Naga gods have always been very selective about the choice of the sacrificial victims. Those Naga deities, who controlled the underground sources of water, could only be appeased by offering to them women, usually having suckling child. The instances of gruesome killings of Rani Sunayana (Sui Rani) of Chamba, Rukmani of Bilaspur, Binchi of Sirmaur and Rupi Rani of Ghushal in Lahul are some of the examples in this regard. Then, there is another class of the Naga gods, mostly confined to the interiors of the region, who demanded only the able-bodied young men in sacrifice to satiate their cannibalistic hunger, and still there are some area-specific gods, who would devour all human beings without any distinction. In another category are such Naga gods who get satisfied with the goat sacrifice. However, it should always be the male one, and still a couple of Naga gods are *dudhadhari*, i.e., they live only on milk. Briefly speaking, strange are the idiosyncrasies of these capricious gods, who have been holding firmly the strings of the destiny of the people in this mountainous region and, thus, commanding overwhelming popular faith since ages.

The autochthonous ophiolatrous tradition did not remain confined only to the popular belief-system, but it also contributed considerably to the subsequent religio-cultural ferment under the classical Buddhist and Vaishnavā religious movements in the Western Himalaya. Many local Naga gods were sublimated into an elaborate abstract concept in a very subtle manner. The snake pantheon and lore of this region have, thus, not remained confined to the primitive beliefs and traditions, but these have liberally been adopted and further expanded by the classical Buddhist and Brahmanic traditions. Innumerable *Jataka* tales and *Puranic* legends woven around the local Naga deities are the eloquent testimony to that fact. Most of these deities have even become classical characters in the Buddhist and Brahmanic literature, and many of them in Kullu area have been redefined as the *rishis* and *munis*. It might also had been a very thoughtful move of the

Brahmanic clergy, at times supported by the local monarchy, to establish their hegemony over the non-Brahmanic religious systems. Under that ploy, many of the Naga gods have been defined as the local manifestations of Shiva (or Mahashiva) and the Nagin as the local manifestations of Shakti. All these, and many other aspects have been discussed at length in the main text.

The thin veneer of the classical religious influences on the native cultic system notwithstanding, the people in this area still regard their Naga gods in the traditional awe and reverence. For them, these deities are neither the celestial nor the mortal beings, but the titans or demi-gods, whom the people regard as their *buzurgs*, i.e., seniors among them. They live, suffer and enjoy with their subjects without any inhibition. The people have identified themselves with these deities through numerous legendary and traditional ties, and they would not hesitate to address even their day-to-day mundane problems to them for seeking solution. That may explain why most of the clan deities (*kul devtas* or *devis*) or the village deities (*gram devtas* or *devis*) in this region are the Naga deities. These gods, seated on their *raths*, occasionally join their subjects, and dine and dance with them in unison. In fact, no social occasion is considered complete without the physical participation of these gods or goddesses. These deities also consider it essential to oblige their 'subjects' by active participation. In fact, it may be inconceivable to imagine the Pahari family and social life without these gods.

The wooden temples dedicated to the Naga deities in this region may easily outnumber the temples dedicated to the other autochthonous and the Brahmanic deities put together. Attempt had been made to document these temples in the classified lists annexed at the end, but these are certainly not all. Many of them have escaped enumeration, and in fact, such job can hardly be accomplished individually. My humble attempt is only a suggestion for the governmental agencies concerned with the conservation of the material culture of the region to undertake proper classified census of the religious places in the region. Such religio-demographic census shall be of the great value for the social scientists, planners, researchers and scholars.

The temples, shrines, votive platforms (locally called *thalas*) dedicated to numerous Naga deities are spread in this region in a wide area extended over the diverse socio-geographical localities. Excluding the *thalas*, most of them are the wooden structures located in the interiors of this region. These wooden temples may functionally be defined as the *dehra* and *bhandar*. The *dehras* are essentially the single-storey wooden structures, located away from the habitations. These essentially consist of the enclosed sanctum with a fronting pavilion-type covered or open space that functions as the *sabha-mandap*. The *bhandars*, built within the villages, are some of the most magnificent edifices of the popular faith and among the best examples of the vernacular wood-based Pahari architecture. Sanctified by the tradition and ordained by usage, the essential architectural characteristics of these wooden temples, the *dehras* and the *bhandars*, have remained unchanged through the ages, for the Naga gods are averse to any change in the character to their abodes. That, however, does not mean that the structures of these wooden temples are now ages old. Certainly not, in fact, most of these temples have been undergoing countless and repeated restorations and repairs in the course of time under the pleasure of the presiding deity. In fact, some of the temples are supposed to be rebuilt once in every twelve years. It is, however, mandatory in such case that the repair or reconstruction is carried out strictly according to the tradition and all the carvings and structural details are meticulously replicated in the new structures so that the original character of the edifice is not disturbed at all. Thus, having undergone renovations and repairs many a times, these wooden temples are essentially ageless. We have discussed the architectural peculiarities of some of these fascinating temples in the present work. By adhering to the traditional values, these sacred edifices of popular faith have done a stupendous job in keeping the traditional arts and crafts alive and vibrant despite irresistible extraneous pressures on the native art and craft traditions. Had these gods not been patronising, the pristine nuances of the traditional art, the art of wood-carving and image-making would have long disappeared or corrupted beyond recognition under the euphoria of system-sponsored commercialism.

The Naga cults and traditions of the Western Himalayan region have been undergoing constant metamorphosis under successive religious and ethno-cultural factors. All those factors have now come down to our times in various forms and manifestations. The cults of Gugga Jaharpir and Mundlikh may be the latest among them. Under that incessant process, the Naga cults and traditions of the Western Himalayan region have proliferated in multiform and in the multifunctional manner. Based on those functional aspects, the present study is spread in eight chapters, viz., (1) Geophysical Panorama, (2) Socio-Cultural Scenario, (3) Genesis of Naga Cult in the Western Himalaya, (4) Naga as the Master of the Subterranean, (5) Naga as the Lord of Weather, (6) Naga as the Terrific God (7) Naga as the Patron God, and (8) The Anthropomorphized Hero.

I have borrowed many legends, particularly related to Gugga, from many works published earlier with due credit to the authors of those works, but have deliberately shunned from reproducing them in their original form for the sake of brevity, and those have been suitably rephrased, edited and condensed to make them adaptable in the general scheme of the book. I had to bank upon the works of my predecessors for verifying certain facts, references, observations, etc. All those authors and scholars and their works have been acknowledged under the Notes and Abbreviations and in the text. Nevertheless, the present study is largely based on my own fieldwork. I certainly do not claim finality of my conclusions derived from correlating, assimilating and analysing the different ethno-cultural and socio-religious aspects of the Naga cultic traditions of this region. However, being a son of the soil, I feel myself certainly in a advantageous position to interpret the finer and deeper nuances of the popular belief-system of this region than an 'outsider' in the similar circumstance would do. In the work of this magnitude, undertaken single-handedly, shortcomings are the compulsory evils. It is hoped that the conscientious readers shall take them kindly and, realising the problems inherent in such study, shall take a positive note of them so that better works on the subject may come out in the future. What I can claim here with all humility is that this is an honest presentation

of an 'insider' about his own socio-religious traditions. I earnestly hope that with some of my first-hand experiences, observations and inferences recorded in the present study, the reader shall find his journey to the exotic realm of the *Nagaloka* in the Western Himalaya informative and fascinating.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible had the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi not extended me the financial support by awarding me a Senior Fellowship. For it, I record my deepest gratitude to them. I am particularly beholden to Dr. (Mrs.) Sanghmitra, Deputy Director in the Indian Council of Historical Research for her generosity.

During the course of my fieldwork, I have been benefited by the hospitality and cooperation of many persons, who most willingly offered me help in various manners. That made my arduous work in the field much easier. Despite my desire, it may not be practicable to acknowledge them individually. I, therefore, record my thanks to them collectively. However, some of my friends deserve special mention in this regards. N.M. Ramaul for his assistance during my tours to some of the places in Sirmaur district, and to Subhash Chaddha who accompanied me to different places in Kangra district. Jaideep Negi provided to me very useful information about the Naga cult in *tehsil* Rohru, to which he belongs. I am grateful to C.L. Kashyap, Archaeological Engineer and Gagan Khanna of the Language Department, Himachal Pradesh for the help they rendered to me.

I must express my appreciation to my friend and the proprietor of Indus Publishing Company, Mr. M.L. Gidwani for his sincere interest in bringing out this work in such a beautiful form in shortest possible time. Last but not the least, I am sincerely beholden to all the members of my family, especially my wife Ganga, who, as usual, supported and encouraged me in my efforts to complete this work.

O.C. HANDA

Notes and Abbreviations

The references to various books in the text have been made in the abbreviated form. Complete bibliographical details of such works are given hereunder. In addition to these, other books related to the present study are given in the Bibliography at the end of this book. Abbreviated titles of books, as quoted in the text are in *Italicised* characters, as *Ladak* or *NSWH*. The names of authors are in Roman characters, as Datar or Cunningham.

AAU: O.C. Handa & Madhu Jain, *Art & Architecture of Uttaranchal*, New Delhi, 2003.

ABLK: K. Antonova, G. Bongard-Levin, G. Kotovsky, *A History of India*, Book I, Moscow, 1979.

AHI: R.C. Majumdar, H.C. Raychaudhuri, Kalikinkar Datta, *An Advanced History of India*, London, 1960.

ASEH: O.C. Handa, 'Archaeological Sources on the Early History of Himachal Pradesh' in *Sources of the History of India*, Ed. N.R. Ray, Calcutta, 1988, Vol. V.

BAAHP: O.C. Handa, *Buddhist Art & Antiquities of Himachal Pradesh, (up to 8th century A.D.)*, New Delhi, 1994.

Datar: B.N. Datar, *Himalayan Pilgrimage*, Delhi, 1961.

Glossary: H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North Western Province*, 1883, reprint Patiala, 1970.

Goetz: Hermann Goetz, *The Early Wooden Temples of Chamba*, Leiden, 1955.

HCIP: R.C. Majumdar (Ed.), *The History and Culture of the Indian People—The Vedic Age*, London, 1952.

HoU: O.C. Handa, *History of Uttaranchal*, New Delhi, 2002.

ISL: J.Ph. Vogel, *Indian Snake-Lore or the Nagas in Hindu Legend and Art*, New Delhi, 1995.

Ladak: Alexander Cunningham, *Ladak—Physical, Statistical & Historical*, Delhi, 1970.

Lommel: Andress Lommel, *Prehistoric and Primitive Men*, London, 1966.

LSI: G.A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*.

Montgomerie: Lieut. Colonel Montgomerie, "Route Map", *Routes in the Western Himalaya, Kashmir & C.*, Dehra Dun, 1909.

NSWH: O.C. Handa, *Numismatic Sources on the Early History of Western Himalaya*, Delhi, 1984.

PHP: V.C. Ohri (Ed.), *Prehistory of Himachal Pradesh—Some Latest Findings*, Shimla, 1979.

PoI, HP: K.S. Singh (Ed.), *People of India, Vol. XXIV, Himachal Pradesh*, Delhi, 1996.

PPT: *Provisional Population Totals of the 2001 Census pertaining to the states of Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal*.

Rajatarangini: Kalhan's *Rajatarangini*, R.S. Pandit (tr.), New Delhi, 1990.

Shali: S.L. Shali, *Kashmir, History and Archaeology through the Ages*, New Delhi, 1993.

TAWH: O.C. Handa, *Temple Architecture of the Western Himalaya, Wooden Temples*, New Delhi, 2001.

Chapter 1

Geophysical Panorama

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

The vast mountainous territory of the Indian Union spread on both sides of the Great Himalaya range between the Indus in the extreme west and the Yamuna on the east by usage has been defined as the Western Himalayan region. Towards north and northeast, the spiny ridges and the snowy crest of the trans-Himalayan Karakoram range separates it from the highlands of Central Asia and Tibet. On the south, the undulating foothills of the Shiwalik define its natural boundary with the Indo-Gangetic Plains in Punjab and Haryana. Thus, the entire Western Himalayan region is approximately situated between 75° and 80° due east and 30° and 36° due north.

Spread in the geographical expanse of 278,799 square km, the Western Himalayan region is administratively organised largely into two states of the Indian Republic. These are the states of Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. A very small part of Uttarakhand in Dehradun district, west of the Yamuna, also falls within the geo-cultural limits of this region.

According to the *PPT*, the state of Jammu & Kashmir is spread in a geographical area of 222,236 square kilometres, and forms the northwestern part of the Western Himalayan region. This figure is inclusive of 120,849 square kilometres of geographical area that is under dispute between India, Pakistan and China. Of this

disputed area, 83,294 square kilometres have been under the Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). Of this occupied territory, 5180 square kilometres was illegally transferred by Pakistan to China, thus 78,114 square kilometres remains now under the PoK. An area of 37,555 square kilometres in Leh district is under the Chinese occupation. Thus, the net total area now under the state of Jammu & Kashmir within the Indian territory is only 101,387 square kilometres, in which 10,069,917 persons live in the fourteen administrative districts. These are: (1) Kupwara, (2) Baramula, (3) Srinagar, (4) Badgam, (5) Pulwama, (6) Anantnag, (7) Leh (Ladakh), (8) Kargil, (9) Doda, (10) Udhampur, (11) Punch, (12) Rajauri, (13) Jammu and (14) Kathua.

The state of Himachal Pradesh, with a population of 6,077,248 persons, is spread over a geographical area of 55,673 square kilometres. The state is divided into twelve administrative districts, viz., (1) Chamba, (2) Kangra, (3) Lahul & Spiti, (4) Kullu, (5) Mandi, (6) Hamirpur, (7) Una, (8) Bilaspur, (9) Solan, (10) Sirmaur, (11) Shimla and (12) Kinnaur.

In addition to these two major partner-states of the Western Himalayan region, a very small area of only 890 square kilometres in the Jaunsar-Bawar *pargana* of the Dehradun district in Uttaranchal, on the west of the Yamuna, may also be included within its geo-cultural sphere of the Western Himalayan region.

Great Himalaya range, which passes through this region from northwest to southeast, has played the most important and decisive role in shaping the environmental conditions and socio-cultural milieu of this region by dividing it into two unequal but distinct segments, the trans-Himalayan northeastern part being larger to the sub-Himalayan southwestern segment. Both these segments are characterized by the two distinctive sets of geo-climatic conditions and ethnographic mosaics.

The Great Himalayan mountain system is spread like a gigantic crescent over the Indian subcontinent, separating it on the north from the arid and arctic climatic conditions of the Central Asian and Tibetan highlands. Defined between the Nanga Parvat (8128 metres) in the extreme west on the Indus and the Namche Barwa

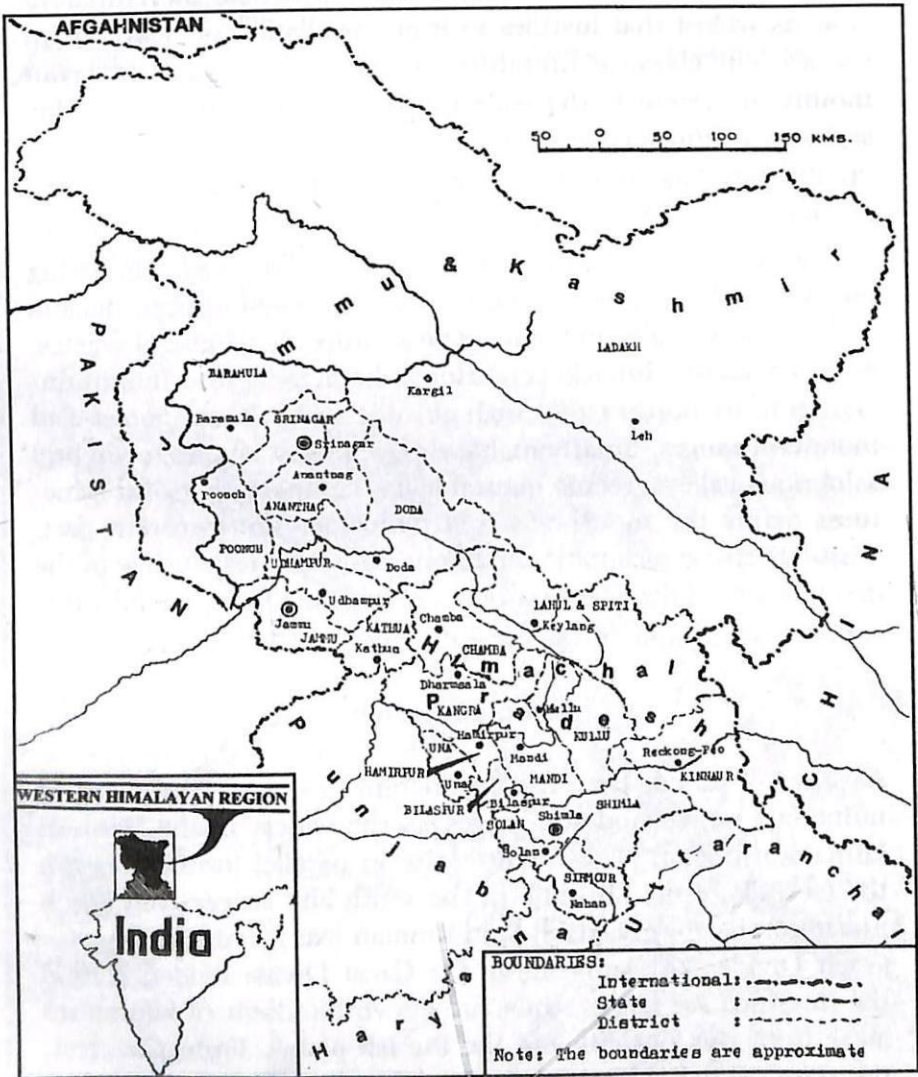


Fig. 1. Western Himalaya (administrative).

(7758 metres) in the east in Tibet, this majestic mountain system is oriented to the southwesterly direction. This feature is more conspicuous towards the western segment, where the Himalaya is at its widest that justifies to it an appellation of 'scimitar' in the ancient classical literature, (Datar, p. 7). The Himalayan mountain system is the widest in this western segment. This segment, confined between the Indus on the west and the Yamuna on the east has come to be known as the Western Himalaya, (Montgomerie).

The Western Himalayan region is characterised by contrasting physical and geo-climatic conditions. The awe-inspiring heights of the silvery peaks and spiny ridges, stupendous glacial wastes, arid and arctic climatic conditions characterise the mountain-system of its northeastern high altitude snow desert. Forest-clad mountain ranges, unfathomable gorges, dreary ravines, open and salubrious valleys, scenic natural lakes, complex geological structures define the monsoonal and temperate southwestern part. These diverse geo-climatic conditions have been responsible to the development of the diverse varieties of flora and fauna, making this region as one of the most enchanting parts on the earth.

Mountain System

As already noted, the Himalayan range-system, composed of numerous ranges and sub-ranges, is the widest in the Western Himalayan region. These ranges rise in parallel formation from the foothills of the Shiwalik in the south and successively reach maximum height in Ladakh-Spiti-Kinnaur axis forming the crest—Great Divide. The summits of the Great Divide hidden behind the intermediate ranges, thus, are drawn hundreds of kilometres away from the foothills and the Punjab plains. From the crest, the trans-Himalayan ranges and sub-ranges follow an ascending order towards the northeast. This trans-Himalayan tract has been known as the Tethys. The glittering peaks of these ranges may be seen popping up from the skimmed clouds that keep these ranges occasionally engulfed.

The parallelism in the range-system of the Western Himalaya

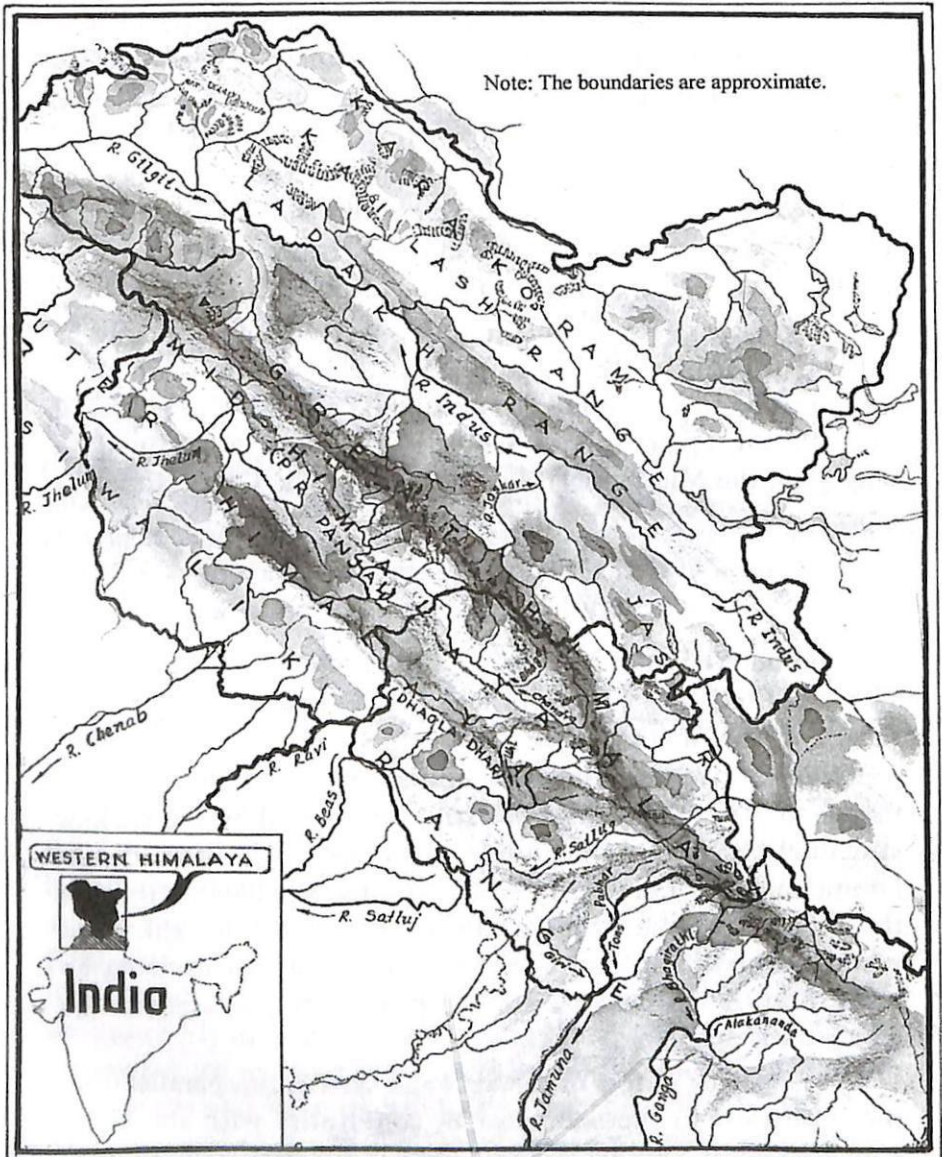


Fig. 2. Western Himalaya [physical].

is one of its striking topographical features. It has contributed the mountainous vastness, agro-climatic variety and the geological diversity to this region. Interestingly, this characteristic parallelism has also been noted in most of the major mountain-systems on the earth, (*Ladak*, p. 42). Against this characteristic peculiarity, the subordinate mountain ranges in the Central and Eastern Himalayan regions rise in an abrupt ascent, running almost at right angle to the main axis of the Great Himalayan range-system. Thus, the Great Himalayan crest in these regions is clearly visible from the *tarai* belt that abuts on the Gangetic plains.

The Western Himalayan mountain-system may broadly be defined into different range-systems characterised by their geological peculiarities and geo-altitudinal aspects. These are: (i) the Shiwalik range, (ii) the Outer Himalaya or Sub-Himalaya range, (iii) the Mid-Himalaya range, and (iv) the Great Himalaya range.

The Shiwalik Range

The southern and the outermost sandstone frontal ranges of the Western Himalaya are the Shiwaliks. The southern slopes of these ranges roughly mark a natural border between the mountainous region of the Western Himalaya and the plains of Punjab in the mainland. The undulating wild stretches formed by the shallow structural basins in the Shiwaliks are as wide as 100 km in the Jammu and Kangra regions that abut on the Dhauladhar towards the northeast. Some scholars have identified the Shiwalik range with the Outer Himalaya range, which may not be reasonable, for both these range-systems are geo-physically and structurally distinctively apart.

The low-lying ranges of the Shiwalik system run parallel from the northwest to the southeast in conformity with the Great Himalaya range, forming beautiful glens in between. None of these ranges, however, rises above 1100 metres in height. These ranges have steeper and broken profiles towards the plains, but these ascend gently towards the north, forming wide and flat undulating basins—the *tarai* or the *duns*. These *duns* can proudly boast of

unsurpassable grandeur in their verdant vales, the gurgling streams and the enchanting lakes, all set in their luxurious best. The *tarai* belt has been defined as the *Upagiri*, that is, the sub-mountains in the *Mahabharata* (2.27.3, for instance).

The Outer Himalaya Range

The snow-barrier and the outpost of the Himalayan mountain system is the sub-Himalaya or the Outer Himalaya range. Anchored in the Gundgarh Peak on the Indus towards the extreme northwest, this range follows a southeastern course and ends up on the south of the Baspa valley in Kinnaur, forming watershed for the Ganges system. Several rivers pierce through this range of about 500 kilometres length. The significant ones among these rivers are the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, etc. These rivers pass through this range before it enters the territory of Himachal Pradesh. In Himachal Pradesh, the Beas cuts it into a fantastic gorge at Larji, the gateway to the upper Beas valley (Kullu valley). Near Wangtu in the lower Kinnaur, the Satluj cuts it forming a deep and dark gorge. Thus, this range is broken vertically into several sub-ranges and ridges. All these sub-ranges and ridges are identified by the distinct geological and geographical characteristics or their local names.

The sub-Himalaya range is at its loftiest between the Beas and the Ravi, where its most conspicuous range—the Dhauladhar (the fabled Dhavalgiri, i.e., the White Mountain)—soars up in an abrupt sweep to 4930 metres from its undulating floor in the Kangra valley. Structured by the layers of clay and mica slates, this range stands as a formidable barrier for the saturated and low-lying southwesterly monsoon clouds. These clouds release most of their watery burden over the southern slopes of this range before these become dry and light enough to rise higher to cross northwards. The southern slopes of the Dhauladhar are, thus, some of the wettest places of the subcontinent. Dharmsala, situated on the southern slopes of this range, receives an average annual rainfall of 3400 mm and ranks the second highest in precipitation in the country, next only to Cherrapunji in Meghalaya, which receives

an average annual rainfall of 10870 mm. This range roughly marks a boundary between the Chamba and Kangra districts of Himachal Pradesh and forms a most picturesque backdrop for the Kangra and Mandi regions.

The southern slopes of the Dhauladhar form watershed for the Beas in the Kangra area. The Dhauladhar, as the name implies, remains snow-covered for most part of the year, affording no access across. Nevertheless, its precipitous and formidable passes have been the traditional thoroughfares for the transhumant Gaddis. They have been crossing these passes with their quadruped wealth during their seasonal migrations ever since they migrated to the highlands of Brahmaur in the upper Ravi basin of Chamba district.

The Mid-Himalaya Range

The Mid-Himalaya range rises in the extreme northwest, on the confluence of the Swat and the Panjkora rivers. It continues for about 750 kilometres eastward up to Uttarkashi in Uttar Pradesh, where it ends up as a cluster of the Yamunotri massifs. This system consists of the chains of numerous ridges. Those have been defined into four distinct massifs, i.e., (i) the Swat range, (ii) the Pir Panjal range, (iii) the Lahul range, and (iv) the Bushahr range, (*Ladak*, p. 65). Of these, the Pir Panjal range is the significant one.

The Swat range extends for about 100 kilometres from the confluence of Swat and Panjkora rivers on the west to the right bank of the Indus on the east. The highest point on this range probably does not exceed beyond 2000 metres.

The silvery peaks and ridges of the Pir Panjal range present a bewitching spectacle of the Himalayan mountainscape beyond the Dhauladhar range. From the south, this range looks far more prominent and majestic than the Great Himalaya range drawn deeper northwards. The Pir Panjal range is spread between the Kishanganga gorge in Kashmir on the west and the Deo Tibba in the territory of Himachal Pradesh on the east. It enters Himachal Pradesh in Chamba district, and runs eastward to form headwaters

for the Beas and its innumerable tributaries in Kullu district.

Northern slopes of the Pir Panjal range form watershed for many rivers. The river Jhelum rises at Verinag at its base in Kashmir, and in the Lahul & Spiti district, these slopes form watershed for the Chandrabhaga river. This river becomes the Chenab on entering Kashmir territory. The famous Banihal pass (2832 mts), the lowest point on this range, provided a fair-weather access across it to the Kashmir valley from the mainland before a tunnel was pierced through it 500 metres below the saddle. Now this tunnel provides an all-weather access to the valley.

The Pir Panjal forms a natural boundary between the districts of Kullu and Lahul in Himachal Pradesh, with only a seasonal communication link through the Rohtang-la (4100 mts) beyond Manali. Further northwestwards, it isolates the Pangi valley (or the Chandrabhaga valley) from the rest of Chamba district, with only a seasonal fair-weather access through various traditional passes, among which the Sach pass (4368 mts) and the Telangi pass (4573 mts) beyond Tissa have been the most frequented ones. I still remember the chilling days, when in my attempt to cross the Telangi pass, I was stranded at Devi Kothi under the thick snow for three weeks in January of 1965.

The Great Himalaya Range

The Great Himalaya range is, in fact, a maze of countless towering ranges. These ranges decline gradually northeastward in numerous parallel sub-ranges and ridges to the edge of Tibetan plateau after having reached their greatest heights. Numerous broken peaks of these ranges, jutting over the clouds, look like massive icebergs floating over the ocean of skimmed milk. The main Great Himalaya range rises higher above the snowline and forms a magnificent crescentic crest for the Himalayan mountain system. It is a zone of perpetual snow and dazzling heights. Some of the world's highest peaks are located in this range, e.g., the Dhaulagiri (8172 mts), the Annapurna (7943 mts), the Mount Everest (8850 mts), and many others. In the *Mahabharata* (28.7), the Dhaulagiri has been called as the *Shvetaparvata*.

In the western part, the Nanga Parvat or Diamir (8182 mts) is the highest peak followed by the Shilla (7027 mts), the Leo Pargial (6791 mts) north of the Satluj above Nako and the Gurla Mandhata (6716 mts). This range is pierced by the Satluj and the Pare rivers towards the eastern extremity of Kinnaur and by the Indus at the foot of Nanga Parvat (8128 mts) respectively. The length of this part is about 1040 kilometres between the headwaters of the Gilgit and the Kunar rivers and Monomangli or Gurla Mandhata peak (6716 mts).

The Great Himalaya range and its northeastern sub-ranges form a natural line of demarcation between the two geo-climatic and geographical zones. To the north and the northeast of it, the cold and dry climatic conditions in the snow desert of Tibet predominate against the temperate and monsoonal climate and luxuriant vegetal growth on the mainland side towards the south and the southwest.

Drainage System and the Valleys

The characteristic parallelism in the Western Himalayan range-system has been responsible to determine the courses of the major rivers and the formation of several gorges and valleys, each of these having its own local geo-climatic, floral and faunal peculiarities. Nestling between these intermediate mountain ranges, the Western Himalayan geographical expanse is composed of numerous valleys, sub-valleys and gorges. Most of these have been created by the perennial snow-fed rivers and streams, which contribute substantially to the two major river-systems of the Indian subcontinent—the Indus river system towards the southwest and the Ganga river system towards the southeast.

Significant ones among the rivers that feed the Indus water system are the Jhelum, the Chenab (called Chandrabhaga in its head-reaches, because it is formed of the two glacial rivers—the Chandra and the Bhaga), the Ravi, the Beas and the Satluj. These rivers, either rising in this region or traversing through it, flow into the Indus towards the southwest. Besides, several monsoonal streams of this water-system—Sawan, Seer, Sirsa, etc.—have also

been responsible for the formation of numerous structural basins, called the *duns*, in the foothill. Most of these perennial and seasonal rivers and streams generally flow diagonally from the northeast to southwest direction, piercing through the different mountain ranges. The Indus, however, is an exception to this rule. It flows in the northwestern direction in most of its length in the trans-Himalayan snow-desert and takes an abrupt turn to the southwesterly direction, piercing the Great Himalaya range at the foot of Nanga Parvat (8128 metres).

Among the major rivers of the Western Himalayan region, which contribute significantly to the Ganga river system towards the southwest are the Pabbar, the Tons, the Giri (or Giri Ganga) and the Yamuna. The Yamuna separates the Western Himalayan region from the Central Himalayan one, as noted earlier. Most of these rivers flow as the wild torrents, cutting very deep and dreary gorges in the rocky strata through which these flow. The banks of these rivers are mostly steep and perilous. Nevertheless, wide and open stretches are also found on the banks of these rivers in certain reaches where the geological strata provide such possibility, but only a few of such stretches qualify to be defined as the valleys. There is, however, an exception to this phenomenon, and that is the structural basin, the *dun*, formed by a seasonal stream—Bata Nadi—in Sirmaur district. This *dun* is erroneously called as the Paonta valley.

Gushing through the rocky geological formations in their head-reaches, most of the perennial rivers have cut the rocky strata of the mountain ranges, forming deep and dark ravines and gorges. However, these gorges open up to form narrow valleys, where the geological formations permit. On entering the sub-Himalayan tract, these rivers lose much of their intensity and follow a gently meandering route through the alluvium, forming several wider valleys of exotic grandeur and natural exuberance. Because of the ravined character of the narrow valleys and the overall southwesterly orientation of the valleys, the sunny hours in the valley—areas are shorter especially during the winter, when the higher mountain ranges put on a white mantle of thick snow. Neverthe-

less, the nature has bestowed these valleys—narrow and wide alike—with all-season scenic extravaganza. The number of these enchanting valleys is very large. We have some of the most significant among them in a bit detail hereunder. These are the Kashmir valley, the Kangra valley and the Kullu valley.

Kashmir Valley

The vale of Kashmir, located in the extreme northwestern corner of the region, is surrounded by the spectacular array of mountain ranges, rising one above the other. These mountain ranges provide an idyllic backdrop for the natural extravaganza spread on the floor of valley. The mighty Great Himalaya range encloses it on the north and the northwest and the Pir Panjal range contains it on the south and the southwest. The valley is spread longitudinally from the southeast to the northwest in a boat-like structural basin at an average altitude of 1555 metres from the mean sea level, and is extended to a length of 160 kilometres and a width of 80 kilometres.

The swampy stretches, lakes, rivers, streams, etc. constitute more than fifty percent of the total geographical area of approximately 13,000 sq km of this valley. Along the foot of the Great Himalaya range flows the Jhelum. It feeds the Wular lake. Jhelum and its innumerable tributaries have been responsible to shape the topography of the valley by dissection of the *karewa* deposits, i.e., the formation of terraces and lowland swampy stretches and lakes. The scenic settings of these water-bodies amidst the soaring and silvery heights have made this valley bewitchingly beautiful, comparable with an 'emerald set in pearls'. The Kashmir valley abounds in freshwater lakes. Some of these are: the Wular, the Manasbal, the Anchar, the Dal, the Haigam and the Hokarsar, besides the highland lakes like the Gangabal, the Sheshnag, the Tarsar, the Marsar, the Kounsarnag, the Alpathar, the Butapathri, the Nilanag, the Naran Naga, etc. These natural water-bodies have not only imparted an exotic charm to this 'paradise on earth', but have also given birth to innumerable tales and legends, woven around them. These form a very significant part of the classical

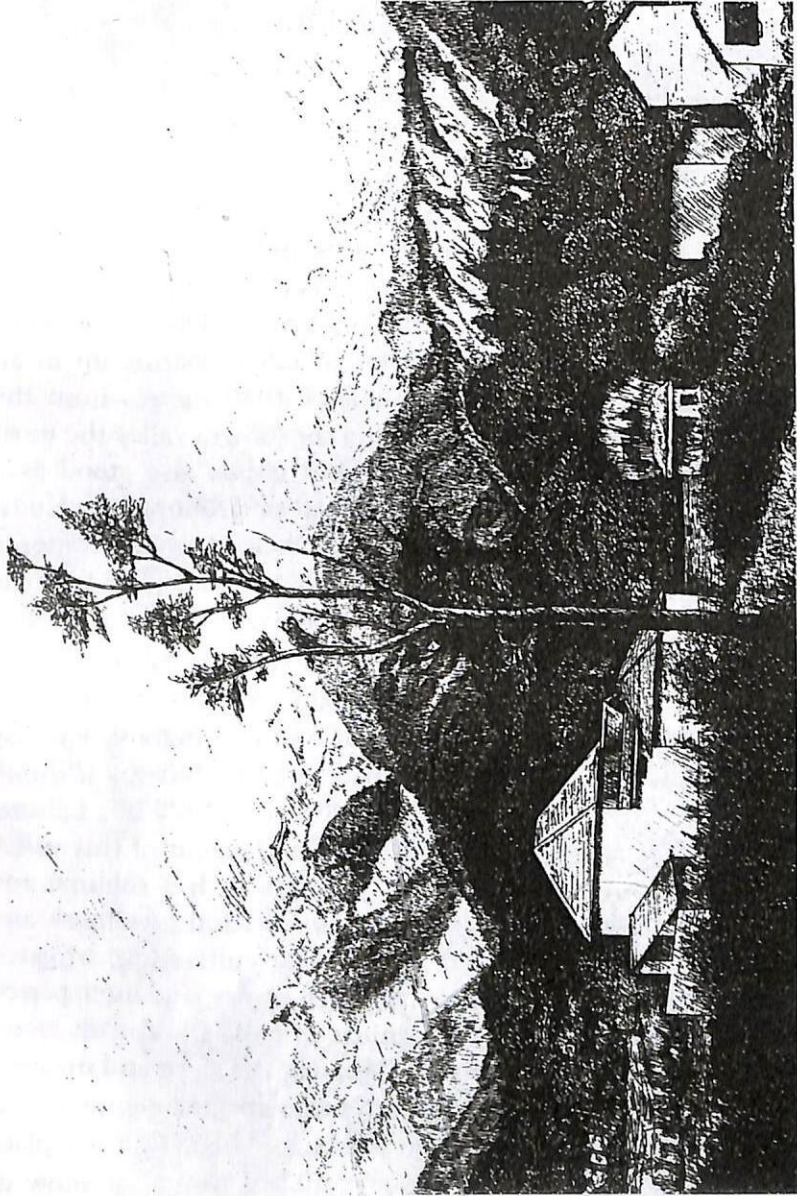


Fig. 3. A village in the Kangra dun.

and popular lore centred on the snake-cult that we shall be discussing in detail in the following chapters.

Kangra Valley

Nestling in the shadow of the Dhauladhar (Dhavalgiri, i.e., the White Mountain), the loftiest landmark of the sub-Himalayan range-system between the Ravi and the Beas rivers, the Kangra valley is one of the most picturesque areas of Himachal Pradesh. This valley is largely drained by the Beas and is sometimes called as the Lower Beas valley. Technically speaking, Kangra is not a 'valley', but a structural basin—the *dun*, furrowed by innumerable rivers, streams and rivulets. The Dhauladhar, soaring up in an abrupt sweep to a stupendous height of 4930 metres from the floor of valley, has not only provided to the Kangra valley the most idyllic backdrop towards the north, but it has also stood as a formidable barrier to the low-lying southwesterly monsoon clouds. These saturated clouds release most of their moisture contents in the valley, thus becoming dry enough to rise higher to cross northward. Southern slopes of the Dhauladhar in the Kangra valley are, therefore, one of the wettest places of the subcontinent. With plenty of water flowing in endless gurgling streams through the terraced paddy fields (*kyar*) all the year round, Kangra valley may aptly be called the rice-bowl of the region. Barnes (*Punjab Gazetteers, Vol. VII, Part-A, Kangra District, 1924-25, Lahore, 1926, p. 4*) has aptly described the scenic grandeur of this valley thus, "No scenery, in my opinion, presents such a sublime and delightful contrast. Below lies the plain of rural loveliness and repose, the surface is covered with richest cultivation, irrigated by streams, which descend from perennial snows, and interspersed with homesteads buried in the midst of groves and fruit trees. Turning from this scene of peaceful beauty, the stern and majestic hills confront us; their sides are furrowed with precipitous water-courses; forests of oak clothe their flanks, and higher up give place to gloomy and funereal pines, above all are wastes of snow or pyramidal masses of granite too perpendicular for the snow to rest on."

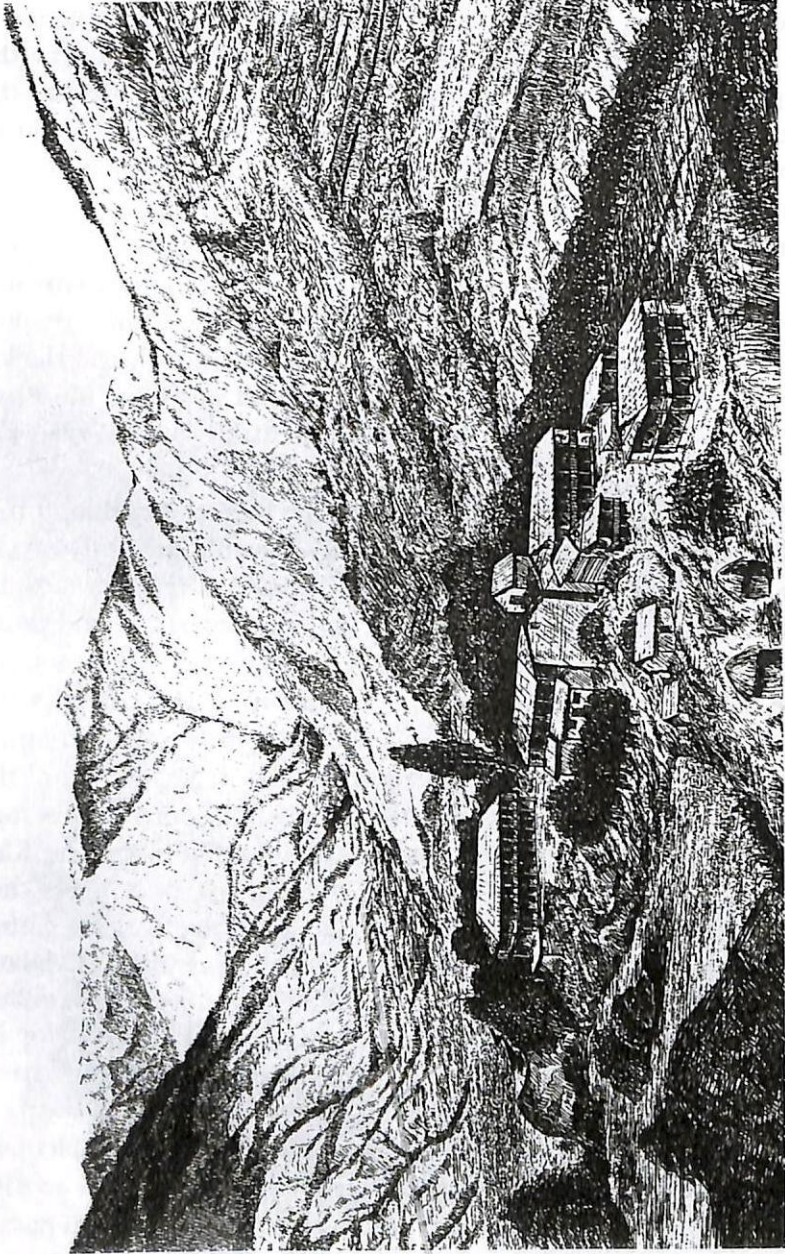


Fig. 4. Rural setting in the Kullu valley.

Kullu Valley

The wide basin of the Beas in its head-reaches, confined between Manali and Larji, is popularly known as the Kullu valley or the Upper Beas valley. It is the fabled land of the *Atthara Kardu*—the Eighteen Nagas, about which we shall be talking in detail subsequently. The main valley, formed by the Beas, may be one of such blessed places on the globe where, despite the nauseating human intrusion, the nature has largely retained its scenic grandeur. The meandering Beas flows here in numerous streams, forming wooded islands in between. Innumerable rills, rivulets and rivers, gushing down the glacial heights through the thickly wooded terraces and gentle meadows further augment the Beas. Some of these tributaries form very beautiful sub-valleys—the Parvati, the Sainj and the Tirthan, etc.

The Parvati river, which pours into the Beas at Bhuntar, forms a sub-valley of that name that stretches towards the northeast of the main valley. Deeply forested mountain slopes, waterfalls cascading from the snowy heights on both sides and the thunderous roar of the turbulent Parvati fill one with the wondrous awe of the nature's intensiveness. Midway in the valley is the fabled Manikaran, known for the thermal geysers. Such natural geysers may also be found in this sub-valley at Kasol, one of the most enchanting spots in this valley, and sulphurous waters may be found cascading down from the mountain to form the Khir Ganga. Incidentally, in the head-reaches of the Beas valley, hot water springs exist at the fabled village of Vashishta, named after Rishi Vashishta. One of the tributaries of the Parvati, the Malana Gad rises from the glacial fields of the Pin Parvati peak. The village Malana, located on a rugged spur in this *gad*, is known for its living village-level theocratic republican institution. Such institutions functioned everywhere in the Himalayan interiors in the past, and still function at many places in the interiors to complement the statutory administrative machinery. This village is also accessible from the main valley through the Chandrakhani pass.

The Banjar is another beautiful sub-valley of the Beas that extends towards the east of the main valley at Larji. This valley is



Fig. 5. The Thirthan valley.

also known as the Sainj valley after the river that forms it. This sub-valley further bifurcates into two open gorges of the Sainj and the Tirthan.

The Beas valley is known for its salubrious climate, lush green coniferous evergreen forests and the bewitching vistas of endless beauty, marked by the succession of mountain-ranges culminating into the snow-clad crest. Interestingly, only the floor of main valley is thickly inhabited, with the villages and towns lined up on both the banks of Beas. In the sub-valleys, the villages are only located higher on the mountain slopes widely separated from each other by the large stretches of dense forests. These villages are generally laid out in the tiny clusters, with the neat slate-roofed houses, built around the towering wooden temple of the village-gods. Most of these village-gods are the autochthonous Naga deities, which were given the Shaiva identity under the Brahmanic influence since the early medieval times.

The rocky and rugged geographical tract of this region east of the Satluj basin falls in the Ganges river system. This eastern part drains into the Yamuna through various rivers, viz., the Pabbar, the Tons, the Giri and the Bata. The geological formation, through which these rivers flow, is very rugged and rocky. Therefore, the riverbanks are here almost vertically steep and precipitous, with open spaces far and between, where the geological features permit. The villages are, therefore, perched on the rugged mountain spurs. Most of these villages are very small, but where flatter stretches are available, larger villages may also be found.

The Pabbar, however, opens up a bit between Chergaon and Hatkoti to form a small but beautiful valley. This valley is known as the Pabbar valley or the Rohru valley. This valley, lying approximately from north to south, may be the sunniest of all the valleys of the Western Himalayan region. While standing anywhere in this valley, one can have an unobstructed panoramic view of the perennially snow-covered magnificent sub-ranges of the Dhauladhar towards the north. This valley is dotted with some of the finest wooden temples of the vernacular architectural style, dedicated to various Naga deities and many other local gods. However, the most

dominated Naga god, the Mahasu, wields his paramount authority in the area.

The southeasternmost end of the Western Himalayan region is demarcated by the Kiyarda Dun or the Paonta Dun, which commonly but erroneously has been defined as the Paonta valley. It is a large stretch of alluvial conglomerate, forming an undulating topography covered with *sal* trees and furrowed by the numerous seasonal rivers. Among these, the Bata and the Markanda are of note. From the northeastern side, the Giri also passes through it.

Though little known, the headwaters of the Ganga north of Bundarpunch in the Kinnaur district also fall in this region. Thus, The Western Himalayan region can boast of being the natural elevated water storage system that feeds most of the rivers of the Indus and the Gangetic river systems.

Bibliography

- Archaeological Survey Reports*, 1907-08, 1923-24.
- Bamzai, Prithivi Nath Kaul, *A History of Kashmir*, New Delhi, 1973.
- Banerjee, Anand Prasad (Shastri), *Asura India*, Patna, 1926.
- Beal, Samuel, (ed.), *Si-Yu Ki—Buddhist Records of the Western World*, London, 1884.
- Bhandarkar, R.G., *Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Major Religious Systems of India*, Varanasi, 1965.
- Chetwode, Penelope, *Kulu—The End of the Habitable World*, London, 1972.
- Cunningham, Alexander, *Archaeological Survey Report*, 1872-73, vol. V, XIV, Varanasi, reprint, 1966.
- *The Ancient Geography of India, The Buddhist Period*, London, 1871.
- De Vreese, K.S.J.M. (ed.), *Nilamatapurana*, Leiden, 1936.
- Dhar, Somnath, *Jammu and Kashmir*, New Delhi, 1976.
- Dutt, Nalinakasha & Sharma, S.N., (eds.), *Gilgit Manuscripts*, 3 vols., Calcutta, 1939.
- Fergusson, James, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, London, 1899, New Delhi (reprint), 1967, 2 vols.
- *Tree and Snake Worship*, London, 1873, New Delhi (reprint) 1971.
- Fleet, John Faithful, *Corpus Inscriptionum*, Varanasi, 1963.
- Gazetteers of the
- *British Garhwal, 1910*, Delhi, reprint, 1994.
- *Chamba State 1904*, Delhi, reprint, 1996.
- *Dehradun, 1911*, Dehradun, reprint 1995.

- Kangra District—Kangra 1983-84*, Delhi, reprint 1994.
- Kangra District—Kulu, Lahul and Spiti, 1897*, Delhi, reprint 1994.
- Mandi State, 1920*, Delhi, reprint 1996.
- Shimla District, 1889-90*, Delhi, reprint 1992.
- Shimla Hill States, 1910*, Delhi, reprint 1995.
- Sirmaur State, 1934*, Delhi, reprint 1994.
- Suket State, 1927*, Delhi, reprint 1997.
- Giles, H.A., *Travels of Fa-Hien*, Cambridge, 1923.
- Goetz, Hermann, *The Early Wooden Temples of Chamba*, Leiden, 1955.
- *Studies in the History and Art of Kashmir and the Indian Himalayas*, Wiesbaden, 1969.
- Handa, O.C., *Temple Architecture of the Western Himalaya—Wooden Temples*, New Delhi, 2001.
- *Glimpses of the Western Himalaya*, New Delhi, 1997.
- *Buddhist Art & Antiquities of Himachal Pradesh*, New Delhi, 1994.
- *Shiva in Art*, New Delhi, 1992.
- *Pashchimi Himalaya ki Lok Kalayen* (Hindi), New Delhi, 1988.
- *Numismatic Sources on the Early History of Western Himalaya*, New Delhi, 1984.
- *Pahari Lok-Geet, Ek Vishleshnatmak Adhyayan* (Hindi), New Delhi, 1981.
- *Pahari Folk Art*, Taraporevala, Bombay, 1975.
- Harcourt, A.F.P., *Himalayan District of Kooloo, Lahaul and Spiti*, London, 1871.
- Hugal, Baron Charles, *Kashmir and the Punjab*, (tr.) from German by T.B. Jervis, London, 1845.
- Ibbetson, Danzil B.; Maclagan, Edward, *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, (ed.), H.A. Rose, Lahore, 1911-1913.
- Jain, Madhu, *The Abode of Mahashiva*, New Delhi, 1995.
- Jasta, Hariram, *Bharat men Nagpooja aur Parampara*, Delhi, 1982.
- Jayaswal, K.P., *History of India*, Lahore, 1933.
- Kalhan's Rajatarangini*, tr. Pandit, R.S., New Delhi, 1990 .

- Kinnar Lok Sahitya*, Laihari Sarel, Bilaspur, 1976.
- Law, Bimla Churan, *Tribes in Ancient India*, Poona, 1943.
- Longhurst, A.H., *The Story of the Stupa*, New Delhi, 1979.
- Majumdar, R.C., *History and Culture of the Indian People*, Bombay, 1953-54.
- Majumdar, R.C.; Raychaudhuri, H.C.; Datta, Kalikinkar, *An Advanced History of India*, London, 1960.
- Marshall, John, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization*, 3 vols., London, 1931.
- Nathan, Dev, (ed.), *From Tribe to Caste*, Shimla, 1997.
- Oldham, C.F., *The Sun and the Snake*, London, 1905.
- Postel, M.; Neven, A.; Mankodi, K., *Antiquities of Himachal Pradesh*, Bombay, 1985.
- Prarthi, Lal Chand, *Kuluta Desh ki Kahani*, Kullu, 1971.
- Rowland, Benjamin, *The Art and Architecture of India*, Middlesex, 1967.
- Shali, S.L., *Kashmir, History and Archaeology through Ages*, New Delhi, 1993.
- Sharma, Banshi Ram, *Himachal Lok-sanskriti ke Strot*, Delhi, 1886.
- Sharma, D.D., *Himalayi Sanskriti ke Muladhar*, Solan, 1998.
- Sharma, Mahesh, *The Realm of Faith*, Shimla, 2001.
- Singh, Madanjeet, *Himalayan Art*, London, 1971.
- Stein, Aurel (tr.), *Kalhan's Rajatarangini*, New Delhi, 1961.
- *Ancient Khotan*, (2 vols.), Oxford, 1907.
- *The Ancient Geography of Kashmir*, Calcutta, 1899.
- Sukh Chain, Pandit, *Legends of the Godlings of the Simla Hills* (transmitted by H.A. Rose), Bombay, 1925.
- Thakur, M.R., *Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Himachal Pradesh*, Delhi, 1977.
- Vether, George B., *Magic and Religion*, London, 1959.
- Vogel, J.Ph., *Indian Snake Lore*, New Delhi, 1995.
- Wake, C.S., *Snake Worship and other Essays*, Redway, 1888.