

## FOLK RELIGION IN THE CENTRAL HIMALAYAS (KUMAON AND GARHWAL)

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### ABSTRACT

A Folk tradition provides the insight into the local beliefs and practices of the people. This local tradition does not rely on the written sources and instead carried through oral means and majorly revolves around the lives of the common people. The area of the study of this paper is the hilly region of Kumaon and Garhwal in the state of Uttarakhand. The paper discusses the local beliefs and practices of the Uttarakhand region. It explores the thin boundary between the local and pan-Indian and the relation in which one co-exists in the other. This paper takes a journey from the brief history of religion practiced in the region to the different cults venerated in the region. Analyzing these local cults and practices, the paper finally depicts the processes through which the folk is assimilated into the fold of mainstream Brahmanical culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Religion, Folk, Brahmanical, Local Traditions, Pan-Indian Traditions, Kumaon, Garhwal

### INTRODUCTION

The region of Central Himalayas stretches on the southern slope between the Great Divide and the Shivalik foothills. It is divided into four parallel zones of Tarai-Bhabhar, Lesser Himalayas, Greater Himalayas and the Trans-Himalayas (D.D. Sharma, 2009). The history of Uttarākhaṇḍa marks its beginning with the Kuṇindas. It seems that from the beginning from the Kuṇindas in the ancient period to the Paurava-Varmans and Katyūrī in the early medieval, from Chandra and Panwars in the medieval and the Britishers in the modern period there were dynamic historical processes which were constantly shaping the region to provide a distinct political identity and culture.

In the context of the religion, the Paurava-Varmans were worshippers of the Naga cult as it becomes evident by their worship of serpent god Viraneśvara. It is believed that Buddhism would have shown a wide prevalence in the region till the early 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. However, one cannot dismiss the possibility of worship of local cults and totems. This time period also witnesses fading of Buddhism in this region, which is related to the theory of Śaṅkarācārya. It is assumed that the arrival of Śaṅkarācārya during the reign of the Katyūrīs converted people to Brahmanism (Badri Dutt Pandey, 2011). The Katyūrī rulers are said to be Śaivites as the imperial title adopted by them as “Maheshwar” might indicate them as worshippers of Śiva. They could have been ardent worshippers of Kārttikeya, son of Śiva as it is said that they named their capital after him. However, if one views carefully the process of brahmanization had begun with the Paurava Varmanas in 5<sup>th</sup> century CE and had started taking a concrete form with the Katyūrīs coming to power. This precedes the whole Śaṅkarācārya story of coming to the region and establishing Brāhmanical culture. The people during the Panwar and Chandra ascendancy followed Smārta sect and invoked many deities like Śiva, Viśṇu, Sūryā, Gaṇeśa, yakṣa and various forms of Śakti. There was also Nātha tradition and even the Panwar ruler Ajayapāla was considered as a

saint of this sect.

In this paper, I will be examining the folk religion of the region and show how the local faith and local religious traditions are assimilated to the mainstream Brahmanical religion. The following sections will provide an understanding of the oral and written tradition with the insight of the folk religion and finally explore the assimilation process of the local entering the world of mainstream religion.

## UNDERSTANDING THE FOLK RELIGION OF THE CENTRAL HIMALAYAS

The region exhibits the worship of various gods and goddesses. However, Śiva and its various forms like Bhairava seems to hold a special importance in the region. The Vaiṣṇava focus of the Gupta period now seems to diminish by the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards and one finds a thrust of Śaiva and Śakta sects. However, I do not claim for monotheism in the region as it gets evidenced by the worship of gods and goddesses of various pantheons and also minor deities.

Apart from the worship of the deities of the Brahmanical cult, the region exhibits the worship of natural objects, spirits, demons, heroes and local gods. The gods and ancestral spirits are often revered and invoked to seek relief from innumerable miseries. With a similar intention of controlling the minds of the people the local religion manifests the political and societal norms. The nature of these gods of the region is considered both malevolent and benevolent. However, E.S Oakley expresses that in the folk religion of the region the relation between that of the god and the deity is of fear and in which the gods needs to be constantly pleased (E.S Oakley, 1905). In fact, the religion believes that the demands and the requirements of the deity if not fulfilled in the exact manner would lead to evil circumstances.

Ramanajun in his work ‘Who Needs Folklore?’ shows how the local is interactive and pan-Indian and the claimed pan-Indian also shows regional variations. He cites example of Sanskrit and suggests that “though trans-local and apparently a-geographic, it has varieties of pronunciation that can be identified as Bengali, Malayali, or Banarasi” (A.K. Ramanujan, 1998). Similarly, the folk traditions are not limited to small localities or language groups. In the form of “proverbs, riddles, jokes, stories, and tunes, motifs, and genres of songs and dances, remedy, recipe are not confined to a region, even though they may be embodied in the non-literate dialects and may seem to be enclosed in those mythic entities called self-sufficient village communities” (A.K. Ramanujan, 1998), they cross regional boundaries like any other daily exchanges of life and that too without the movement of the people of the communities.

Oral traditions, whether in the form of cultural performances in various events or not, are themselves a kind of text and also the producers of texts which are further spread not only orally but also in some kind of writing. Also, the written gets transferred through oral means. In this manner the boundaries of the terms like the ‘great’ and ‘little traditions’ blur and in contrast, are engaged with past and present, the regional and trans-regional and written and oral. Thus, they interpenetrate each other and unite.

The folk religion finds space in the form of oral tradition as well as sometimes in the local imagery of small shrines. Some of the tutelary gods of the region are the Golu Devta, Ghandial, Lalu, Ghoril, Kalua, Bhairab, Nar Singh, Bharari, the Pandavas, the Acharis, Bholanatha, Ganganatha, Kalabishta, Kalua, Aidi, Chaumu, etc. which are paid homage in the form of music, dance, offerings and sacrifice. Some of the local gods which find their assimilated form in the Puranic tradition are Bhairab who is now identified with Śiva and Nar Singh which has been accepted as an incarnation of Viṣṇu (H.G. Watson, 1989).

### **Ghaṇṭākarna**

Ghaṇṭākarna or Ghaṇḍyāl is a deity worshipped by all classes. He is considered as an attendant of Śiva and sometimes as manifestation of Gaṇeśa. The local people believe him to possess broad ears like bells. He is worshipped in the form of a water jar and is considered as the healer of the cutaneous diseases and sometimes can also be found standing as gatekeeper in temples (K.P. Nautiyal, 1969).

### **Smaśana or Kavīsh**

The demon smaśana is said to be found in the cremation grounds placed near the confluence of water bodies. It is considered as a malevolent spirit which has a black colour and has hideous appearance. Nautiyal suggests that there is a belief that those who die an untimely death due to an accident or some long, lingering disease are the ones who become smaśana or kavīsh (K.P. Nautiyal, 1969).

### **Raja-Rajeshvari**

There is only one temple in Dewalgarh in the Garhwal hills where the deity might have been worshipped by the petty kings since the early medieval period. As the deity was worshipped by the Garhwal rājās, it would have probably gained the name of raja-Rajeshwari. In the present times, her worship is undertaken in the form of Durgā during the Navratri. The deity is depicted in a very unusual style where she is seated on the thrones and has three feet, which rests on Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Nautiyal suggests that this representation would have been under the influence of Tāntrism in this part of the Uttarakhand region (K.P. Nautiyal, 1969).

### **Kshetrapāla**

This is a tutelary god of fields and boundaries. It is a benefactor deity who does not get angry and force worship on people. It has a protective nature and every village in the region resides the deity in a small shrine in order to protect their crops (K.P. Nautiyal, 1969).

### **Chaumu**

This is also a tutelary deity which is considered as the protector of cattle. Some Katyūrī kings have constructed temples after their names. In fact, there are some families like that of Joshi in Kumaon and Pokhara of Garhwal, which worship the deity as Kula-devta (K.P. Nautiyal, 1969).

### **Snake Worship**

One of the important and special places in the religious sphere is occupied by the snakes. This worship is very common throughout Garhwal and some parts of Kumaon where snakes are awarded the status of the village deity. There are various names by which the Nāgadevtās are known. Some, such names are Beṇi-nāga, Karakota, Seśnāga and Vāsuki-nāga (K.P. Nautiyal, 1969). D.D. Sharma assumes that the worship of the Naga cult in the region might be an effect of the snakes, which can be associated with water (D.D Sharma, 2009).

### **Sorcery and Witchcraft**

In the area of Jaunsar, peoples belief in the existence of ḍaṅkans 'women possessing the evil eye'. They believe such women can inflict harm on anyone or anything they find lovely and attractive through their evil glare.

These *ḍāṅkans* are feared because it is believed that during the night they either assume the form of spirits or enter into human bodies to eat their heart, which consequently leads to a person's death due to a disease or an accident. D.D. Sharma suggests that there is also a belief in male *ḍāṅkans*, who are much more aggressive and more powerful than the female ones (D.D Sharma, 2009).

### **Belief in Omens**

The superstitious nature of people makes the person's belief in animate and inanimate objects. Their belief in the activities of birds and animals and has assigned them auspicious and inauspicious character. People also believe in dreams and their interpretation. Like seeing a marriage procession or feast is considered a sign of a bad news and is indicative of a demise of someone close to the family. However, a death scene is believed to provide longevity to the dreamer and the person whose death is dreamt (D.D Sharma, 2009). Instead of analyzing the dreams psychologically if the needs really arise, the general tendency is to provide it a superstitious character. However, these kinds of beliefs are not uncommon in other parts of the country and a set of people do believe in them.

### **ASSIMILATING THE LOCAL TO THE BRAHMANICAL RELIGION**

The local deities are either considering the manifestation of Śiva, Gaṇēṣa, Viṣṇu or Śakti. Some of these local gods which find their assimilated form in the Puranic tradition are Bhairava who is now identified with Śiva and Nar Singh which has been accepted as an incarnation of Viṣṇu (H.G. Watson, 1981). This section tries to explore this assimilation of the local to the Brahmanical and analyze it.

D.D. Sharma opines that the culture of the region is heterogeneous in its form “which for centuries has been assimilating in its fold cultural traits of various ethnic and social groups inhabiting and migrating to these regions from time to time” (D.D Sharma, 2009). He argues that culture is not an independent entity, but a composite idea of multiple elements. In fact, he believes that the culture in the region is “neither an exclusive possession of any particular racial or ethnic group, nor the creation of a particular period of time” (D.D Sharma, 2009), but an amalgamation of various elements which add changes or modify the existing cultural elements. He stresses majorly on two issues about the formation of this culture. Firstly, he opines that the assimilation of tribal deities was made by identifying them with the Puranic ones by modifying versions of Purāṇas. Secondly, he argues that the setting of the region on the lap of nature would have been an invitation for the immigrant population, which when settled in the region entered into matrimonial alliance with the indigenous population which consequently resulted in socio-cultural exchanges.

The region has an oracular tradition in which the “*gantuas*” who are also called “*pucchars*”, claim to be the mouthpiece of the god which hint on the superstitious nature of the people. They are consulted when there is some problem. They explain the cause of the problem by being in a state of the fit and speak in incoherent language. The solution might include a sacrifice or even a continuous worship of the offended god which is conducted in the form of jagars. The jagars should not be confused with ordinary folk song, as they are the fables of awakening. According to Aditya Malik, “Jagar means ‘waking’, ‘staying awake’, and is sometimes translated as ‘night vigil’ and thus, the jagar can therefore be described as an intense ritual of ‘awakening’ for both deity and devotees” (Aditya Malik, 2009). William S. Sax also points out the importance of these jagar Gathas and suggests that “public rituals are the site par excellence where identities and relationships are created, re-affirmed, reiterated, and sometimes reconfigured. As a self-defining actions,

rituals are powerful precisely because they do not work simply at the level of language, but at the most fundamental level of the body” (William S. Sax’ 2009).

Ramanujan suggests that the oral traditions give an alternative conception of deities. For instance, he argues that the village goddesses are very different from the deities of the main pantheon. He names them separately as the Sanskritic Breast Goddesses who represent the main pantheon and the Tooth Goddesses who represent the mother who curses. The divine goddess is created by the theory of ascent while the origin of the village goddess reveals a journey of ordinary women who faces injustice and rises in fury to subjugate others and demand worship (A.K. Ramanujan, 1998). Also, in the Sanskritic myth, it is the father figures that lust after the daughters. While in the context of village deity, the female is shown with explicit sexual desires (William S. Sax’ 1991).

### Nanda Devi

The oral traditions offer us a different view of the female from the views found in the written texts. In the Sanskritic myth, the male gods create the goddess and give her their powers. However, in the folk context the primordial goddess wishes to create by the union with her son and gives them her powers. Similar is the case with the goddess Nanda of the Central Himalayan region. William Sax suggests that the mountain goddess creates and gives power to the lords. She is benevolent in nature, but also gets angry and destroys her own people. The story of the local goddess Nanda does not have much of chants and charms but songs sung by people. Every year there is Yātrā of her going back to her in-laws from her natal home which is a celebrated occasion.



**Figure 1: Nanda Devi and Sunanda Devi, GBVP Museum, Almora**

Śakti is worshiped in Uttarakhand with various names, i.e., Nanda, Parvati, Gauri, Hemvati, Kāli, Caṇḍika, Bhadrakāli, etc. (Badri Dutt Pandey, 2011). However, Nanda is mostly appropriated in the main pantheon as Pārvati and is worshiped with the same enthusiasm in both the Garhwal and Kumaun divisions of the region. The links of the local tradition are derived from the Devī Mahatmaya. Nanda Devī is also called the Goddess of King of Kings, Rājarājeśvarī for whom the Royal pilgrimage has to be arranged. In fact, the Chand rulers believed consider Nanda devi as the daughter of their family (Badri Dutt Pandey, 2011).

She is portrayed as the disobedient wife who longs for her natal home and always cribs about the miseries of her husband's abode. It is believed that she longs so much for her natal home that she curses her own kingdom when she is not called for the festivities. The Garhwali dhiyānī threatens her maitīs when she is neglected and gives them doṣas.

The divine dhiyānī is invited every year to her natal village and thus similarly the unmarried daughters are invited back as without them the ritual would not be successful. Sax argues that “the power of dhiyānī to curse her mait, and the requirement that she participate in its rituals, give the lie to the hegemonic, high caste, male, literate ideology emphasizing the brides's change of the substance and termination of her relationship with her mait. The dhiyānī's power suggests an alternative, female point of view: that a woman remains a part of her mait even after marriage” (William S. Sax' 1991).

Women and drummers are not allowed beyond a point in the Yātrā. In fact, the example of Roopkund is an excellent example of disobeying the rules of Yātrā which leads to the death of all the people in the procession. It also depicts the caste segregation in the village communities which separates Brāhmaṇas themselves, Brāhmaṇa and Rājput priest, harijans and untouchables. This suggests that though the divine mother is local in its origin, she does believe in the segregation of sex, caste, pollution and purity. However, this kind of the Royal pilgrimage would have politically strengthened the unity of land and people.

Ramanujan argues that the folk traditions indirectly provide glimpses of the society by focusing on “the woman, the peasant, the non-literate, those who are marginal to the courts of kings and the offices of the bureaucrats and the centers of power” (A.K. Ramanujan, 1998). However, I feel that myths of the village deity should not just be associated with giving voice to the otherwise marginal women, which would in turn assume a homogenous status of women vis-a-vis men in the villages. But, it can also be understood in the light that the tribal associations of the village still venerated the mother principle which was believed to channelize fertility. The folklore, thus, serves as an important medium to understand and appreciate relations between the local and the pan-Indian and the social, religious and political context they explain.

### **Bhairava Worship**

In his book “God of Justice”, Sax suggests that unlike the grand shrines, the small villages of the Central Himalayas have small earthly shrines which do not house the deities of the main Hindu pantheon, but the minor local godlings largely known as dēvtās. One such case is of Bhairava, this local Bhairava is though similar to the Bhairava of Sanskrit scriptures, yet it is different from it. He argues that “the Bhairava of the scriptures has long fangs and glossy, blue-black skin, while Bhairava of Garhwal is a yogī who wears a loincloth and carries fire-tongs, a wooden staff, a trident, and an orange cloth bag. His ears are split and he wears rings in them, like the Kanphata yogis of the Nātha tradition” (William S. Sax' 2009).

The deity does not find mention in any Sanskrit verses, but finds representation in the songs of the low-caste healers who call upon the deity to cure afflictions. This involves the oracle to sing songs of Bhairava and perform his rituals which demand a bloody sacrifice and possessed body (William S. Sax' 2009). Bhairava is not illustrated through the iconography of the region, but rather represented through his accoutrements—the trident, fire-tongs, and stuff that is called his “signs” or “nishan” (William S. Sax' 2009).





**Figure 2: Nishans of Bhairava in Mukteshwar Temple, Almora**

Bhairava's cult flourishes mainly in the cult centers like the "temple of Kaleshwar (colloquially known as Kaldu), a few miles east of Karanprayag on the Badrinath road, and the temple of Kothyar near Gair Sain" (William S. Sax' 2009). It is believed that the cult of Bhairava spreads through three "paths"- the path of the curse i.e when a doṣa is given; the path of the land, i.e. when a land already marked as a territory of Bhairava is acquired, and finally through the path of the dhiyānī i.e. cult accompanied by out-married daughters to their new homes (William S. Sax' 2009).

One of the stories recited by the oracle, hint on the foreign origin of the deity. This gatha narrates the story of two girls Umeda and Sumeda who belonged to a lower caste known as tamata. They were abducted and sold into slavery to the Gurkhas by the Myur Rajputs who wanted to punish their fathers. Their fathers went to Tibet to seek help from their spiritual teacher whom they addressed as mother's brother (māmā). After listening the whole incident, Lama made a "round red pot and filled it with 42 heroes (vir), 52 bahiyal (fierce beings associated with Kachiya Bhairava), 84 fierce goddesses (Kāli), 64 jogini, and 90 Narasimha, in the end he tied the pot's end with a cloth and asked them to take the path to the land of Uttarakhand" (William S. Sax' 2009). It was Bhairava in the form of a yogi, who came out from this pot. Though these are just oral sources about the deity's origin, yet some aspects of it are particularly interesting, for example the use of "red pot" of the story is actually germane in the ritual that establishes a shrine for Bhairava. Sax argues that this shows a belief in the theory that Bhairava was an outside deity who came to Uttarakhand from Tibet, and not from the Indian plains.

According to Sax, Bhairava is considered as an important deity in Tibetan Buddhism, and his study with the consultation with the gurus reflected on the fact that "the tradition in general, and its rituals in particular, came from the other side of the great Himalayan range. They were said to have been brought to Uttarakhand by the so-called Bhotiyas, a high-altitude community that formerly conducted the trade between India and Tibet" (William S. Sax' 2009). The language of the cult is indicative of a Bhairava's connection with the tradition of the "eighty-four Siddhas," which is linked with Tibet and gets supported by the story of two girls. A link could also be traced with the Kanphata yogi tradition as most of the songs of Bhairava evokes Gorakhnātha tradition founded by Gorakhnātha, who is also associated with the Siddha tradition and is one of the Kanphata ("split-ear") yogis, so called because fully initiated members of the order split their ears and wear large earrings ascetic (William S. Sax' 2009).

Sax suggests that according to a local Brahman priest of the region, “Bhairava is a divine being, an incarnation of Śiva. And Kachiya is his angry form—he is filled with rage” (William S. Sax’ 2009). The form of Bhairava most closely associated with the Harijans is Kachiya, often called Kachiya-Bhairava (William S. Sax’ 2009).

The influence of Nāthapanth is clearly visible in the Central Himalayas. The cult of Bhairava initiates with reference to the guru Matsyendranath and some unknown Nātha yogis who might have found the cult. The oracular tradition of Bhairava makes use of terms like “alak” and “adesh”, which are associated with the Kanphata traditional. Sax argues that “the adjective alak (from Sanskrit alakshana, “without characteristics”) is used by Nātha yogis and theologians to designate the formless absolute, while the noun adesh (“permission”) is conventionally used by Nāthas when requesting permission to join or leave a group of fellow Nāthas” (William S. Sax’ 2009).

The folk religion of the region, thus contains strong hierarchical underpinnings of caste. The veneration of some particular deities is associated with the specific caste communities. For instance Bhairava, one of the aspects of Śiva is considered the deity of shilpkar or lower caste community of the region.

William S. Sax suggests that in the Jagar ghathas or stories recited by the people belonging to low caste communities, Bhairava appears to be the saviour or the lord of justice who emancipates the weak from hardships and exploitation, cures afflictions and pains, heals people not only physically but also emotionally in various ways. He argues that these stories are caste based and that higher caste groups do not seem to acknowledge them. In fact, he borrows the term from Scott and calls these stories as the “hidden transcripts” where “one particular sentence appears over and over in these stories: “I have no one” (William S. Sax’ 2009).

In the book *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott argues that peasant resistance takes place in two levels, i.e. in the form of a war of words as criticisms and actions, whether the large scale uprising or everyday small resistance. The critical part is not only one sided, as Scott observes that the intra-village elites also do not have a good opinion about the poor. The difference lies on the fact that the work is demeaned on the face while the authoritative is condemned behind the back. In such similar context, the creation of narratives of the lower caste groups seem to be as an antagonistic symbol to challenge and criticize the so called high culture. (James Scott, 1985).

### **Golu Devta**

Goril also referred as Goriya, Gwel, Gwall and Gol is said to be a prince who is worshipped for his wisdom. Such a name traces its origin from the prince’s story being drowned in the river Goriganga by his stepmother and he named as Goril by the fisherman who saved his life. One does not know the exact time since the deity is revered. The deity is famous in mostly the Kumaon hills than other regions in Uttarakhand and especially among the lower classes. It is placed in small shrines in various villages of Kumaon which believe that the deity will protect the village from calamities and evil (K.P. Nautiyal, 1969).

This Goludev is considered as a human avatar of Bhairava, the wild and dangerous aspect of Śiva who is manifested and embodied locally in various forms in the Central Himalayas. He performs a similar function of providing justice like Bhairava. He is considered to be of Royal origin that faced injustice at the hands of his step-mothers but fought to reclaim his rights. It is believed that as he was the only son of the king, his stepmothers attempted to kill him and drowned him in a river. He was saved by a fisherman who raised him and after gaining some age he claimed his status of a



prince and proved his stepmothers guilty. Since then he has undertaken the authority to maintain justice in the region of Kumaon by conducting tours and ensuring that justice is embarked (Aditya Malik, 2009).



**Figure 3: Golu Dev, Near Chittai, Almora**

Aditya Malik states that Goludev's devotees seek his intervention in the matters of justice through two ways. The first way of addressing the matter is through written petition (manauti) on an official stamp paper or blank sheets together with offering of brass bells in his main temples (also known as 'courts of justice') at chittai (near Almora) and Ghoda Khal (near bhavali). And the second manner involves performing an oracular ritual known as jagar (Aditya Malik, 2009).



**Figure 4: Brass Bells Tied as Manautis in Chittai**

Malik argues that the jagar Gathas of Golu Dev reiterates that in the notion of the avatars, "consciousness exists primarily in a series of embodiments: Śiva is embodied in Bhairava who is embodied in Goludev who furthermore is embodied in the Nachnevala or dancer" (Aditya Malik, 2009) and central to Śiva's manifestation is the dance performance, like his 'dance of rapture' in the forest of Pines (Aditya Malik, 2009). He asserts that these jagar Gathas should be viewed as 'ritual embodiment rather than a ritual of possession or trance'. He believes that the term possession carries the baggage of a spirit in the body, thus creating a duality of body and consciousness; however, embodiment on the other hand, emphasizes on pure consciousness of the dancer who embodies the god Bhairava or Śiva and bypasses the subjectivity and objectivity of the world to attain self knowledge. Thus, he suggests that "it is in this sense that we can speak of a system of

‘knowledge and practices’ rather than ‘belief and practices’ in which the deity is a powerful, active agent, whose power rises with the creation of embodied knowledge, (and not with the occurrence of spirit ‘possession’), through the use of both representational and non-representational language and movement or ‘dance’” (Aditya Malik, 2009).

### Narsingh

The Narasimha, “the man-lion,” avatar of the god Viṣṇu holds a local importance in the region of the Central Himalayas, especially Garhwal Himalayas and is known as Narsingh. This avatar is particularly violent one as he is associated with the ripping open of the chest of the demon king Hirankashipu. The deity holds a popular place in the Chamoli District, and the antiquity of his cult is corroborated by his most famous temple situated in Joshimath. It is believed to date back to the time when Joshimath was the ninth-century capital of the Katyūrī kings, and since then it holds an important local religious space.

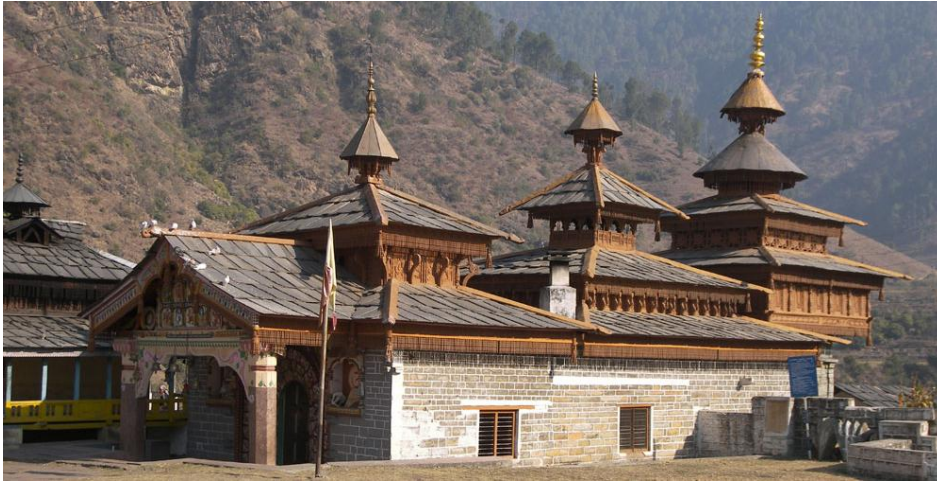
The jagar Gathas is initiated with the incantation to Gorakhnātha who is associated with Narsingh. Then the story of Prahlada is recited and as soon as the oracle utters the word ‘Rama’ and repeats it someone gets possessed without even letting the story to complete (Anoop Chandola, 1987).

The Garhwali myth is different from the Sanskritic version. Here, Narsingh is not called upon as Viṣṇu, one of the major deities of the Hindu pantheon, but as the devotee of Devī and Gorakhnātha. In this context, Anoop Chandola argues, “the Garhwali myth unites Vaisnavism (Narsimha), Śaktism (Davy), and Nātha sectarianism (Gorakhnātha) in one single story- a realistic representation of the popular Garhwali religion (Anoop Chandola, 1987). Thus, it can be suggested that in the assimilation of the Puranic and local, the local only modifies.

Narsingh is particularly associated with local Rajputs who consider him as their lineage deity. William S. Sax suggests that Narsingh is associated with two main forms, “the vegetarian or “milk-drinking” form (dudhadari) and the “blood-drinking” form (raktadari) that accepts animal sacrifice (William S. Sax’ 2009).

It is interesting to note that the local religion does not differentiate between the powers of their deities. One such evidence is the shrines of “Narsingh-Bhairava” which often appears together in the same place. However, as Narsingh does not always have a violent form, so if it is present in his “milk-drinking” form, he has to be separated from Bhairava by a wall. Further, in case of a bloody sacrifice, a curtain also needs to be drawn to obstruct his vision (William S. Sax’ 2009). I assert that this form “Narsingh/Bhairava” where Narsingh represents the composite form of Viṣṇu and Bhairva represent the composite form of Śiva, can also be understood as an assimilation attempt to attain something close to the “Hari-Hara” form of the main Hindu pantheon.

### Mahasu Worship



**Figure 5: Temple of Mahasu, Hanol**

Hanol is considered the place to which the Pandavas escaped from laksha Graha. According to H.A. Rose, Mahasu Devta appears in the quadruple form as the four brothers. There is a legend associated with the place which states that when Krishna disappeared at the end of Dwapar Yuga, he was followed by the Pandavas. They crossed the River Tons and Yudhishtira was fell in love with the beauty of the place and thus requested Vishwakarma to construct a temple there. However, in Kaliyuga demons started devastating villages of the area. Kirmir, was the power of all the demons and devoured all the seven sons Brahmin named Huna Bhatt, who had gone to bathe in the river Tons. He was not satisfied with this and desired to violate the honour of Kirtaka, the Brahmin's wife, but to his despair Kirtaka made an escape. The couple then prayed to Hatkeshwari Devī or eight armed Durgā who advised them to go to the Kashmir Mountains and venerate Lord Śiva. Śiva asked the Brahmin to plow the field and it was from there that Śakti emerged. From this Śakti were born four brothers, the four Mahasus who helped the place get rid of the demons. (H.A. Rose, 1907). The Chalda Mahusa acquires the prominent position and is worshipped as a local manifestation of Śiva and forms an example of assimilation of local deities into the Brahmanical pantheon.

### Pandava Worship

The Himalayas are filled with the lores of the Pandavas. Like Pandukeshwar and its association with the birth of the Pandavas, then their visit the Panch kedars, and other caves to seek legitimisation of the Pandavas as their ancestors. The Vana Parva of the Mahābhārata mentions the tour of the Pandavas to Badrīkashram (K.M. Ganguly, 2001). The other story characterizing the Pandavas is the last journey of Yudhishtira. Diana L. Eck suggests that the shrine of Badrīnāth clings to the rocks of Alaknanda which leads to the path of Svargarohini, the ladder to heaven from where, Yudhishtira one of the Pandavas is said to have left the earth (Diana L. Eck, 2012).

In the book *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pandava Lila of Garhwal*, Sax aims to show how Pandav Lila constructs a regional self, a gendered self, a caste self, etc. He suggests that “the self of the dancer is no one and nothing. And it is everyone and everything” (William S. Sax, 2002). In his work he analyses a regional tradition with variations even inside the tradition.

The performances of rituals through the art of dance and music create an experience which not only emphasize on the moral and legal codes, political, social and religious scenario but also legitimizes the status claimed by the performers and audience. In this book, Sax tries to deal with cultural constructs relating to personhood which aim to represent the self.

Sax also discusses about the variations it has from the Sanskrit epic. Like for instance, according to Sanskrit versions of the story, Nakula and Sahadeva were twins, but according to the Garhwalis, Nakula was Pandu's only biological son, born of his union with his wife Madri. The people associate themselves with dance of Nakula, the cowherd. His other brothers were children of gods and possessed divine powers, but according to the local version of the Mahābhārata, Nakula was “the sole biological son of Pandu, the human son of a human father” (William S. Sax, 2002).

Even the Rājputs try to take up the role of the Brahmanas and claim to rise to the status of such performance. These dances claim to provide legitimisation of the Rajputs by drawing their ancestry from the Pandavas and the hegemony of the Brahmanas who claim the pure and high status and are responsible to cook the ritual rice. The martial virtues dramatized in Pandav Lila are expected to be inculcated not in males generally, but specifically in Kshatriya males of legitimate birth (William S. Sax, 2002).

Women in the remote areas participate fully in the performance, while the women folk of areas which are influenced by the culture of the north Indian plains are often not allowed to participate. Sax argues that in the Pandava Lila there are two contrast images of the “Daughter-in-law and Mother-in-law which embody both sides of the distinction between the fierce, blood-thirsty goddess and sexually active female, on the one hand, and the benevolent, vegetarian goddess and nurturing, non-sexual mother, on the other” (William S. Sax, 2002). Thus, the women's representation of the epic heroines in the form of Daughter-in-law and Mother-in-law classifies the cultural construct of the feminine in the region.

Worship of Pandavas is prevalent in the lower valleys in Jaunsar region, worship of Karna in the middle and in the high valleys the worship of Duryodhana or Someshvvara (the name by which the deity is currently known) in Chakrata region. This way the villagers not only represent themselves, but the others in the Garhwal region and also the rest of the north Indian plains. The Garhwali Pandava Lila draws from a local culture that includes aspects of caste and gender discrimination, but also surrounds the larger pan-Indian narrative of the Mahābhārata story with its local variations. Thus, the performances represent caste, gender, regions, and finally interpersonal identities.

## CONCLUSIONS

So, one finds that the region experiences the faith on the deities of the main Brahmanical fold as well as various tutelary deities. However, this hilly region with variant population content and geographical space offers an individual religion to a particular family in the form family gods or Kula dēvtā and to a community in the form of grama dēvtā or village deity. The folk religion of the region is, however affected by the living conditions of the people.

It can be observed that the folk religion of the region exhibits a tendency of assimilating the tribes into the main Brahmanical pantheon. Some of these local forms completely disregard the caste differences while others limit themselves to caste underpinnings. The folk religion, though provides some space to local heroes and villains; it does not remain untouched from the politics of caste, sex and class. Further, the worship of nature and superstitious beliefs might be an



effect of the harsh living conditions in which the people of hills maintain their livelihood.

The Jagar stories seem to establish links of the deities with Gorakhnāth which makes one believe on the strong sway of Nāthpanth on the belief and ritual of the region. However, the spread can further be understood in the light of the tradition of the local rulers deriving legitimacy from the Nātha Siddhas.

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