

Worshipping of Goddesses in Kangra Hills: A Case Study of Vajreshvari Temple

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Kangra is one of the largest districts of the Himachal Pradesh. In ancient Indian traditions, the term Kangra is depicted as Trigart which means “the land of the three rivers”. Goddesses are one of the popular deities worshipped in the hills. Many legends connected with the origin of the goddess in hills still exist. The cult of the goddesses associated in its beginnings with original faith, and deep-rooted in antiquity, had early become absorbed in the Hindu pantheon. The revelations of the goddess prevailing in the Kangra acquired an outstanding place in the history of oral traditions of hills. Most of the goddess cults were recruits from semi-brahminical and aboriginal circles. Devi is a popular object of veneration all over the province, her worship being in vogue in most of the places in diversified forms in Kangra. The renowned shrine of Vajreswari Devi is of a great relic, is located in the old town, popularly known as Bhawan. This temple is regarded as the one of the fifty-one shaktipithas in India. Many pilgrims from far places come to pay homage to Devi which made this shrine more popular. Role of temple administration in matters of temple affairs is very important. By interviewing temple priest and Temple Management Committee efforts were made to trace the history of temple and rituals performed with its significance.

The concept of the goddess as it appeared had a threefold characteristic: the ordinary form, under her numerous names as Uma and Bhavani; the ferocious form under her names like Kali and Chandi; and the sensual form under her names like Shayama and Kumari.ⁱ The goddess too became Shakti, the supreme power taking female form. Several of the highest voyages of the Hindu mind made anxious themselves with the understanding of the universe as a manifestation of power. Highly intellectualized symbols were evolved. The garland of skulls that the goddess wore was in fact the garland of letters of the Sanskrit alphabets; the corpse like body of Shiva on which she stood as the inert, changeless aspect of the Supreme. The tradition about 108 *pithas* had some importance in India to the sectarian worshippers who often attempted to endow their respective deities with 108 names.ⁱⁱ About the fifty - one *shaktipithas* in the Himachal Pradesh it is believed by the devout that fifty one body parts of Goddess Sati, wife of Lord Shiva, fell in different regions which were later worshipped as *Shaktipithas*.ⁱⁱⁱ Some of the most famous temples of Himachal Pradesh are located in the Kangra region. The most famous shrines were Jawalaji *mata*, Vajresvari *mata* and Chamunda *Mata* and many local *devis* were worshipped at village level including Bilasa, Jalpa, Bala Sundari, Bagla Mukhi, *devi* Bharari, Hari *devi*, Chamundri *devi*, Bajar Shuri, Jatanti *devi*, Amika *devi*, Anjana *devi* etc.

The female deities were connected with the founding of Raja's kingdom in Himachal Pradesh. It is significant that the Kangra royal line traces its descent from the *Devi* and that the Katoches even to this day consider themselves as "the children of the *devi*" and when a Rajput of Kangra is believed to be lucky; it is said of him that "the Goddess always walks by his side".^{iv} The family gods and goddesses of the ruling dynasty usually acted in the role of the guardians of the kingdom shielding the rajas in their struggle against the enemies of the empire.

The Vajresvari *devi* and Jawalamukhi in Kangra, Chintapurni in Una and Naina *devi* in Bilaspur districts are visited by hundreds of thousands devotees every year from far and wide areas of entire north India. The legend traces their antiquity to hoary past, at least for the temples at Kangra and Jawalamukhi, but we have no means to trace the architectural forms of ancient times as the present shrines are of recent period.^v *Devi* or Durga, a deity of aboriginal background and the most important of all the Mother goddesses is praised in local folk lore and oral traditions as a virgin goddess, killer of the buffalo demon, delighting in offering of meat or animals sacrifices. There is an attempt to associate the goddess kali, killer of Bhambu Rao, the eater of women

breasts with the Vaishnava pantheon by describing her as wife of Pandavas, Draupadi or Panchali and with the Siva pantheon as the consort of Siva. The practice of blood-rites including human sacrifice in honour of female deities is also referred in local folklores and oral traditions. The growing association of a developing vague ritualism with the mother cults explains the growth of Tantricism in Punjab hills. The goddesses multiplied in numbers and with them grew the tantric sects. Most of the goddess cults were recruits from semi-Brahmanical and aboriginal circles.

Goddess goes by many names Durga, Kali, Gauri, Asuri, Parvati, Kalka, Maheshvari, Bhiwani, Asht boji and numberless others. According to Hindu *shastras*, there are nine crores of Durgas, each with her separate names. The humbler divinities, Sitala, the goddess of small pox, Masani and such other goddesses of disease, are but manifestations of the same goddess. She is called Mahadevi, the great goddess, Maharani the great queen, and the Devi *mai*, Devi *mata*, the goddess mother. She is known, from the places of her temples, as Jawalaji, Chamunda *devi* Mansa *devi*, Chintpurni, Naina *devi*, and the like.^{vi} In Kangra alone there are numerous local *devis*, and 360 of them assembled together at the founding of the Kangra temple.^{vii} The temples at Kangra and Jawalamukhi are in the charge of the rapacious *Bhojkis*.^{viii} At the latter place a large number of sheep and goats are supposed to be sacrificed. The appetite of the *devi* is capricious, and the votaries are usually informed that she is not quite ready for her meal. The offering is left, hurried away, and sold in the neighbourhood for a trifle under its value to men who again resell it to other pilgrims as per information recorded in the gazetteer of Kangra in 1883.^{ix}

Vajreshwari *devi* temple was founded in the time of Mahabharata, but there is neither archaeological nor literary evidence to support the claim. The earliest historical reference of the temple that we get belongs to the beginning of the eleventh century when temple was desecrated by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1009 A. D. The temple was probably rebuilt soon after and throughout the medieval period we find it repeatedly being attacked by Muslim rulers like Muhammad Tuglaq, Feroz Tuglaq and Muhammad Sayyid. Akbar is also said to have visited the place. In Ain-i-Akbari, Abul Fazal noticed that in order that their prayer favourably was heard by *Mata*, some of the devotees cut out their tongues; with some the tongue grew again on the spot and with others later on. Emperor Jahangir is also said to have visited this place. There is no reference to

Aurangzeb but it is unlikely that the itching fingers of his iconoclastic governors would have spared the place. Throughout this period what was the shape of this temple is not possible to determine. Several architectural members and sculptures datable from about the 9th century onwards indicate the existence of a shrine here. This is also attested by a long inscription in Sanskrit, written during time of Sansar Chandra I in *sarada* characters belonging to the fifteenth century A. D.

An early eighteenth century document from Kangra has been deciphered by B. N. Goswamy and Maholtra. In this document formal request has been contained in chaste Persian by the priests, concerning the celebrated temple of the Goddess, Vajreshwari *devi*, at Kangra.^x The petition having been granted, it becomes a joint authority given to the priests of the temple by the Mughal Governor of the Kangra fort under his seal, to collect a specified levy or cess on every pilgrim coming to Kangra. This document raises some points of specific meaning relating to the relationship of Hindu temples to Muslim authorities on the one hand and to pilgrims on the other.^{xi} The document records that the priests of the temple of Vajreshwari *devi* at *bhawan* commonly called Bhojkis here in Kangra approached the Mughal governor of the Kangra fort under whose direct authority the temple lay, with humble petition, for agreement to continue to levy the cess on pilgrims mentioned therein. The occasion for the petition must have been the succession of a new Emperor at Delhi, Muhammad Shah, (the seal bears the date: "The First Regnal Year") necessitating all rights and endowments, etc., granted by the previous Emperors, being transformed or confirmed, in an agreement with established practice.^{xii}

Another inscription in the temple premises records its construction by Sardar Desa Singh Majithia, the Sikh Governor of Kangra, in A. D. 1814 at the instance of the priest Harlal Bhojaki. A photograph and details of temple have been recorded both by Alexander Cunningham and J. Ph. Vogel. Vogel states that the temple of Sansar Chandra's time was completely concealed under the brick structure of Desa Singh's time, which was in the style of a dwelling house of that period with the exception of the uneven dome and Kioskos on the top.^{xiii} This dome was gilded by the Sikh Queen Chand Kaur, wife of Kharak Singh. The dome had the pattern of lotus petals at the base. This temple was completely destroyed in the devastating earthquake that shook the entire Kangra region on 4 April 1905. The present temple was built in 1930s.



(Fig. 1 Showing the Vajreshvari Temple, Picture Clicked by Researcher)



(Fig. No. 2 Depicting the Vajreshvari Temple Garbhagrahya View, Picture Clicked by Researcher)

The Vajreshvari *devi* temple has forty sculptures of god and goddess. The main sculpture is of Mahisasurmardini made of sandstone which belongs to tenth century A.D. In image

Mahisasurmardini is shown standing on the back of buffalo. A lion behind her has been represented as her *Vahana*, (vehicle).^{xiv} The image is disfigured but a number of *Ayudhas* can be seen. The head of the buffalo has been shown cut off. The right leg of the *devi* is placed on the back of her lion and her left leg touches the body of the buffalo. Another image of Mahisasurmardini made up of sandstone belongs to early medieval period of ninth-tenth century A. D.^{xv} The picture depicts goddess' attack on the demon Mahisha to her right. The female armed attendant is shown. The goddess is surrounded by flames, rising out of her body. Demon Jalandhara's image also located in temple made of sandstone belongs to the tenth century A. D; it shows demon Jalandhara falling flat on his chest when slain by the eight –armed *devi*. The image of marriage of Shiva and Parvati made of sand stone belongs to late medieval period i. e., fourteenth century A. D. It depicts the marriage scene of Siva and Parvati. The priest has been shown standing in between Siva and Parvati. Another image is of Siva and Parvati made of sandstone which belongs to late medieval period of fifteenth century. A. D. In this sculpture Siva and Parvati have been standing along with Hanuman and others. A sculpture of ninth century A. D. made of sand stone shows Siva-Parvati in Paryankasana *mudra*; Parvati here has been shown sitting on the lap of Siva.^{xvi}

One of the important features of this temple is its uniqueness. The space between the entrance door and *garb ghraya* is known as *jagmohan*. Above this space on right side there are three domes, which have taken the shape of Temple, Masjid and Gurudwara. This is the best example of Indian sculptor which signifies the respect for all religion.

At the entrance gate of the temple there is an image of Laal Bharav. It is said that this image is miraculous, if any calamity fall upon the temple and Kangra this image predict it ahead of time as sweat and tears starts rolling from the eyes of image. There is an image of the head of Dhyanu Bhakt at the entrance door. The *pujari* said that he was the prime *bhakt* of *devi*. He roamed all over the Kangra and promoted *devi's* glory wearing yellow clothes. He belongs to the Agra, town in Uttar Pradesh. Many people believed that dhyanu *bhakt* cut down his head two times but his head regain again but third time his head did not regain.

During my personal visit to Vajresvari Temple I saw many pilgrims from U. P. who comes here wearing yellow clothes to pay homage to *Mata* and records are kept of visitors in *Bahis*.^{xvii} It is believed that when people from *vraj* land came to visit this temple more and more, this temple

came to be known as *Vrajesvari* because Uttar Pradesh is known as the *vraj desh* and *Mata* is called *Isvari*, and their combination forms the word *Vraj desh ki Ishvari*. There are many other small temples of other gods and goddesses inside temple premises such as *Sitala mata*, *Tara Devi*, *Anna Purna*, *Lal Bhairav*, *Kaal Bhairav*, and *Kshetra Pal*. Devotees after *Devi darshan* pay their homage to the these gods and goddesses. *Tara devi* temple was unaffected during the eart bquake of 1905.



(Fig. No. 3 Temple of Lal Bhairav)



(Fig. No. 4 Temple of Sitala Mata)



Fig. No. 5 Temple of Tara Devi) (Fig. No 6 Temple of Shri Khestra Pal)

Rituals Performed in Temple

Rituals performed in this shrine are as follows. Traditionally one of the oldest *Saktipithas* in Himachal Pradesh is said to be the place where the breast of Sati fell. Though it is associated with the goddess *Tara* and also an important sacred place in *Jalandhara pitha* in *Trigarta*, its history, as already referred to above, goes back to the pre-Muslim period.^{xviii} Here goddess

Vajresvari is worshipped as Tripura Sundari according to the tantric rituals by hereditary priests of Bhojaki family.^{xix} The present account is based on narration/interview with the temple priests and management incharge *pujari* Naresh Kumar, *pujari* Rajan Sharma and collaborated by a publication of the temple trust. In the early morning at a fixed hour, the designated priest after taking bath and wearing fresh dress opens the temple, wakes up the goddesses and provides them with proper *asana*. The leading goddess is represented by three *pindis*- Vajresvari in the centre flanked by goddesses, Ekadasi and Bhadarakali. They are bathed along with their *ganas* - lion, trident, incense-burnes etc. with milk, curd, honey, ghee and *gangajala*. Thereafter the *pindis* are covered with sandal paste and the idols are dressed with clothes, flowers, vermilion etc. and throughout the process, the priest recites mantras. He is assisted by two other priests in the process. Thereafter the goddess is offered the morning *bhoga* consisting of *puri*, *chana* and milk along with variety of fruits after which full *aarti* is performed and the temple is opened to devotees.^{xx}

Five times in a day worship is performed here with slight changes. During the day time rice, sweet rice and *kheer* along with at least three types of vegetables/*dals* and other dishes are offered. Thereafter, the *bhoga* is distributed to the devotees in *langar*. In the evening the rituals are same as the early morning and the *bhoga* consists of *puri*, dry *dal* and five types of dry fruits. At this time the priests, recite some secret *sotras*, known to the hereditary priests only; there after the bed (*saiya*) of the goddess is prepared ceremonially and amongst the chanting of *mantras* she is put to sleep. A hand written manuscript of the *mantras* is in the possession of the priests and worship is performed according to them.^{xxi} Animal sacrifice was prevalent here till recent times, but the same has been banned since 1957 and is no longer practiced.

Administration of Temples in Kangra during 19th and 20th century

Temples have been the centers of socio-economic and cultural activities of the society in India. They enriched the social life of the people and acted as guardian of culture. The administration of the temple was on the model of political administration institution.^{xxii} It has been correctly observed that, “the temple with the course of time has become an institution and its behaviour touched the life of the people at many points thus enriching and ennobling their lives”.^{xxiii} The temples of Kangra particularly Vajreshvari, Jawalji and Chamunda are old and well known and major pilgrimage sites of India. “Sacred and benevolent institutions in the Indian sub-continent

have been established, maintained and protected from early times by Hindu kings who regarded themselves to be particularly emotional with the heavenly duty". The Rajas had almost absolute control over the internal affairs of the temples they supported. For centuries huge tracts of land were granted to the temples. With the assistance of the Brahmans, the Raja was capable to secure almost complete control over temple's income and property.^{xxiv} The rulers of Kangra –the Katochs, looked after the temples of Kangra. Subsequently, the Sikhs in progress were looking after the temple and then again the hill Rajas undertook the duty.^{xxv} The ruler had reflective influence on the temple and had to interfere in its management, for the effective running of the dealings of the temple. Earlier the Katoch and later the Sikhs did interfere in the management of the temples.

It was first time observed by Moorcroft, who travelled to the Kangra in 1826,^{xxvi} "whatsoever money is presented to the goddess is the Raja's (Katoch rulers), and the *Brahamns* are to be allowed only to the donation given to them, which they signify to be little enough, and totally insufficient to the maintenance of several hundred persons".^{xxvii} He also claimed that Sansar Chand's (the Katoch ruler at that time) revenue had reduced because of the failure of so many of his estates. So his patronage to major temples around Kangra decline to a great extent and so did his claims to the share of the actual acceptance.^{xxviii} The same report has been revealed in the Gazetteer of 1883-84, which depicts that at one time Katoch rajas had the greater part of the income of the temple of Jawalamukhi.

The decline of the Katoch rulers after the conquest of Kangra by Ranjit Singh in 1809, led to their influence in the temple retreating and the place being taken by the Sikhs.^{xxix} "The Sikhs government always took share of the offerings of the pilgrims and refunded them on the development of roads, *sarias* etc. and ratified assured rules that seemed an attractive way of addition to the comfort of the pilgrims and the visitors.

The relationship between goddess and villagers is reciprocal. The people worship goddess and in return it is believed that people are provided with good harvest, fertility, protection against evil spirits, diseases and unnatural death. The fear of primitive man still lurks in the mind of the man in the hills, and he envisages the goddess normally as malevolent and awful. If she is benevolent and mild, it is only because she has been appeased by worship. There has been the practice of blood rites as well as human sacrifices in honour of female deities which has been referred in

local folklores and oral traditions. The people of Kangra celebrate all the days sacred to *devi* that is the first nine days of waxing moon in the months of the *Chetr* (March-April) and *Asuaj* (Sept-Oct). In Kangra it is customary to worship *devi* on the first day of *Navratra*, to sow barley and water it and to keep a lamp burning by it. On the eighth day barley is harvested and a sacrificial fire is lit, ending with breaking the fast next day. On these occasions the *devi* is embodied as a girl less than ten years of age and offerings are made to her as if to the goddess. Special feasts are given to little girls twice a year and they are given *dakshina*, as if they were Brahmans. This custom is also known under the name of *Rali* worship.^{xxx}

Temples of Kangra, in course of time, prolonged and assumed such significance as it became essential to maintain it in a very systematic way. The proper maintenance of the temple was certainly not an easy task. From time to time, new systems were introduced to improve the administration, to bring transparency and improvement in daily ritualistic services and this, naturally, involved the establishments of an administrative machinery to look after the proper management of the temple.

Thus it can be assumed from our long survey and sources that the custom of worshipping of goddesses is as old as our civilization. The goddesses have been worshipped in different forms which continue till date. The general people in the hills do not perhaps understand the philosophic aspects of their faith; yet *devi* became the deity most widely worshipped by the rural population of Kangra State and as such revelations about goddesses seem to have assumed eternal realities in minds of worshippers and devotees.

ⁱ B. N. Goswamy, 'The Social Background of Kangra Valley Paintings', Ph. D. Thesis, Panjab University, Chandigarh, 1961, p. 176.

ⁱⁱ D. C., Circar, *The Sakta Pithas*, Motilal Banarasidass, Indological Publishers, New Delhi, 1948, p. 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pratibha Chauhan, 'Full Faith in Offerings, Not Facilities', *The Sunday Tribune*, 14 December, Chandigarh, 2014, p. 14.

^{iv} Karuna Goswamy, 'Vaishnavism in the Punjab Hills and Pahari Paintings', Ph. D. Thesis, Panjab University, Chandigarh, 1968, p. 46.

^v *Gazeteer of the Kangra District, 1883-84, Part I*, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, p. 69.

^{vi} B. N. Goswamy, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-77.

^{vii} Denzil Ibbetson, Edward Maclagan, *Religious Life of Indian People*, Amar Prakashan, Delhi, 1991, pp. 337-38.

^{viii} *Patta in persian, hindi granted by raja sansar chand of kangra to purohit at jawalamukhi.*

^{ix} *Gazetteer of the Kangra District, op. cit.*, p. 66.

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- ^x B. N. Goswamy and Malhotra, 'An Early Eighteenth Century Document from Kangra', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1973, pp. 203-4.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 205
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, pp. 203-207.
- ^{xiii} Hutchison & J. Ph. Vogel, *History of Punjab Hill States, Vol.II, Department of Language and Culture, Reprint, Shimla, 1952, p. 379.*
- ^{xiv} Lokinder Singh Negi, *Nagarkot Dham, Shri Vajreshvari Devi Mandir, Itihaas Avam Parichay, (Hindi), Kohinoor Printers, Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh, 1996, p. 43.*
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, pp. 43-47; Dalip k. Chakrabarti, and S. J. Hasan, *The Antiquities of Kangra, Munshiram Manoharlal, Indain Institute of Advance Study, Shimla, 1984, p. 55.*
- ^{xvii} Bahi's kept in the family of rajan sharma, bhojki, priest of temple vajreshvari, in which name of the visitors to the vajresvari mata temple records.
- ^{xviii} D. C. Circar, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- ^{xix} Lokinder Singh Negi, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
- ^{xx} H. A. Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 339-44.
- ^{xxi} Lokinder Singh Negi, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
- ^{xxii} Lokinder Singh Negi, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- ^{xxiii} Pallavi Mishra, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
- ^{xxiv} Patta in persian , hindi granted by Raja Sansar Chand of Kangra to purohit at Jawalamukhi.
- ^{xxv} V. V. Verma, *The Sikhs and The Kangra Hill States, (1469-1846) B. R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 2010, p. 49.*
- ^{xxvi} W. Moorcroft & G. Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Province of Hindustan and the Punjab & C, Vol. II, London, 1841, Chandigarh, 1972, p. 73.*
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.
- ^{xxix} Patta granted by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to the pujari of Jawakamukhi Temple dated in 1825.
- ^{xxx} S. S. Charak, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-19.