Indelible Imprint of Indigenous Naga Communities in the Himachal Himalayas: A Media Discussion

Flying Officer Dr. Chaman Lal
Head, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication
Vallabh Government College Mandi, Sardar Patel University, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh
Email: chamanlalkrantisingh@gmail.com

Abstract:
The Indus Valley Civilization is acknowledged as one of the most significant ancient civilizations globally. During this period, the Naga communities were the indigenous inhabitants of the Himachal Himalayas. The Naga, an ancient tribe, practiced Naga worship, a tradition that traces its origins to the Harappan Civilization. One of the seals from this era depicts a serpent deity, with individuals bowing in reverence before it. In Pali, the term "Naga" translates to "elephant," and it is believed that Buddha was connected to the Naga (elephant) lineage. The Arya-Naga alliance, formed during Buddha's time with the help of Avalokiteshvara, led to the establishment of Nag Panchami, a celebration dedicated to the Nagas. In mythology, Lord Shiva adorned himself with serpents, while the serpent deity Sheshnaga protected the infant Krishna. Naga worship has deep historical roots in Himachal, where Naga deities continue to be widely revered. The Naga tradition is prevalent in regions such as Lahaul, Kinnaur, Chamba, and Mandi. In Lahaul, deities like Keld and Ghep are worshipped as Naga gods, while in Kinnaur, the Naga origin stories align closely with those of Kullu. Numerous Naga temples are scattered across these regions, including Baseharu Nag, Sapni, Bruja, Paunda, Sangla, Rapang, Shishering, and Leo. In Chamba, temples dedicated to Naga deities include Indru Nag, Kelang, Vasuki, Vasan, and Kugati. Kullu is home to eighteen Naga deities, while Mandi boasts temples such as Mahunag and Kamru Nag. The name "Nag" is commonly associated with places in Mandi, including Nagdhar, Thunag, Nagon Ka Van, Nagon Ki Bobdi, and Nagon Ki Jheel, and is also a prevalent surname. In Kangra, Naga symbols are carved on stones placed at the entrances of many homes. The name Vasuki, a prominent figure in Naga mythology, frequently appears in these representations. Naga figures are also carved on the doors of temples throughout the region.

Keywords: Himalayas, Naga, Cultural Identity, Civilization, Natural Resources, Indelible

Purpose of the Current Research Paper:

1. To examine the enduring influence of the Naga communities in the Himachal Himalayas.
2. To investigate the contributions of non-Aryan communities in preserving natural resources.
3. To explore the role of the non-Aryan Naga king Shambar in conserving water sources in the Himalayas.

Data Sources and Methodology:

This study relies primarily on secondary data, including books, journals, and newspapers. A comprehensive literature review has been conducted, with selected events analyzed and compiled for the research.

The Naga Legacy in the Himachal Himalayas:

Historically, the Himachal Himalayas were inhabited by indigenous communities such as the Kol, Kirat, Kinnar, Naga, Hali, Doom, Rihaade, Baadi, and Ghirat. These communities lived during the time of the Indus Valley Civilization, preserving a distinct non-Aryan culture, which can still be observed in various regions today. Unlike the Aryan civilization, which focused on lowland settlements, the high-altitude people of the Himachal Himalayas were regarded as non-Aryan.

In ancient times, the people of the Himachal Himalayas sought refuge in caves for safety, gradually transitioning to pastoralism by herding goats and sheep. Over time, they adopted agriculture, with cave dwellings remaining common in regions like Lahaul, Spiti, Kinnaur, and Chamba. In fact, some people in Lahaul-Spiti still reside in homes resembling caves. These indigenous communities contributed significantly to the region's cultural heritage.

Nag Worship in Himachal:

Nag worship remains a prominent practice across Himachal, with regions such as Kinnaur, Lahaul-Spiti, Chamba, Mandi, Kullu, and Kangra home to numerous temples dedicated to Nag deities. At temple entrances, serpentine sculptures are frequently observed. Legends and oral traditions often speak of the time when the Naga community ruled the area, emphasizing their spiritual and cultural impact.

The Role of the Nagas in Water Conservation:

The Nagas were believed to be guardians of water resources, originating from lakes and rivers. As water deities, Nag temples became centers for ceremonies, particularly during droughts or periods of inadequate rainfall. While Indra was regarded as the god of rain, 'Indu Nag' was also worshipped as a rain deity. The Nagas were revered as protectors of livestock, with offerings of the first milk and ghee being presented to them during rituals.

The Aryan-Naga Conflict:

The Rigveda recounts a war between the Aryan god Indra and Vrtra, a serpent-like figure. The term 'Ahi' refers to the serpent, implying it once dominated water sources in the region. The Nagas, known for controlling water, were seen as rivals by the Aryas, leading to a protracted conflict. King Shambar, a formidable Naga ruler, engaged in a bitter war with Indra. Despite a 40-year struggle, the Aryans could not defeat him.

The Naga-Arya Alliance:

According to legend, a peace treaty brokered by Avalokiteshvara during the time of Lord Buddha resulted in the formation of the Arya-Naga alliance. Following this, the Aryans began celebrating Nag Panchami, and Naga worship spread throughout the region. Before this alliance, similar peace agreements may have been forged between the Nagas and the Aryas. In Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva adorned himself with serpents, Vishnu rested upon the Shesha serpent, and Sheshnaga protected the infant Krishna. Several prominent Naga figures, such as Vasuki, Takshak, Karkotak, Padma, and Shankh, are mentioned in various texts, with these names deeply embedded in local traditions. The Mahabharata also provides valuable insights into the birth and evolution of the Naga community.

Nag Worship in Himachal:

Nag worship continues to thrive in Himachal, with numerous temples dedicated to Nag deities such as Mahunag, Kamru Nag, and Vasu Nag. Regions like Lahaul, Kinnaur, Chamba, Mandi, Kullu, and Kangra are home to numerous Nag temples. Places like Nagdhar, Thunag, Nagos ka Van, and Nago ki Jheel in Mandi are intimately associated with Nag worship, which remains an integral part of local culture.

Naga Tribes and Social Evolution:

Historically, Himachal's tribal society was caste-free, with no rigid social hierarchies. Over time, however, caste distinctions began to emerge. In Spiti, for example, caste divisions were not recognized, and people of all social backgrounds shared food and drink together. Scholars such as Rahul Sankrityayan have noted that in the mountainous regions, professions like washermen, barbers, or potters were not common.

Nag and Buddhist Dharma:

During the reign of Emperor Ashoka, Himachal became part of the Maurya Empire. Ashoka sent Buddhist monks to propagate Buddhism in the region. Many Naga communities embraced Buddhism, and during the travels of Xuanzang (629-645 AD), he recorded the presence of numerous Buddhist monasteries in Himachal.

Conclusion:

The history of the Nagas in the Himachal Himalayas is a testament to the region's rich cultural diversity. Although the precise origins of the Naga communities remain uncertain, their legacy continues to inspire and captivate. Over time, the Nagas integrated with other communities, leading to a synthesis of cultures reflected in modern Hindu and Buddhist practices. Archaeological evidence, including ancient settlements, artifacts, and sacred sites, provides valuable insights into their way of life and cultural contributions.

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