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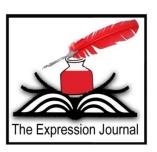
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THE CULT OF COWHERD BOY IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS

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Abstract

The Western Himalayas presents unique and rich culture of popular and tribal beliefs, which are represented in their religious and social faiths. Himachal is known as the own land of God or the home of gods. The cult of Baba Balak Nath is of great fame in the Shivalik hills. It has recognition far and wide. It is visited by lakhs of devotees on different occasions. Religious belief system of Himachal Pradesh is very vide and complex, due to the mixture of Hindu pantheon and localized cults. It is hard to know that how many cults and sects prevalent in the hills, but the worship of Baba Balak Nath is also observed by numerous people from beyond Shivalik hills. The people are come far away to pay their abeyance and secure blessing and well being of progeny.

Keywords

Balak Nath,	Worship,	Gorakhnath,	Deot Sidh,	Hinduism a	and Nath (Cults

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I

Religion and spiritual convictions are closely interlinked with the society and culture of Himachal Pradesh (Kumar, 2020, pp 74). There have been two type of division in the Indian religious system one is the faith of ascetics mystic in nature and second is the faith of masses (Kumar, 2020, pp 254). Western Himalayas are finest example of such practitioners; their religious belief system is complex and full of such cults. They are following Hinduism is general but on the other side they have great faith in local deities. It is evident from the number of cults prevalent in the region (Kumar, 2020, pp 255). Pahadi (local term for inhabitant of hills) has strong connections with various cults prevalent in the hills (Kumar, 2020, pp 210). So few of these cults have influence over large region and lakhs of devotees. We can observe hundred of cults in the hills. The cult of Nath is of great fame in the Shivalik hills. It has recognition far and wide. Numbers of shrines related to Naths are present in the Shivalik hills. The cult of Baba Balak Nath is one of them. It is visited by lakhs of devotees on different occasions. The Baba Balak Nath is believed to be ever young god as the name indicates (Sharma, 2006, pp 93). A similar Sidh of Naths noticed in the district of Kangra and named as Balak Rupi (Form of a boy). According to the story he is considered as the form of Shiva, but burial of twelve Sidhas near to this shrine indicate and proved his connection to the Sidhas. Third proven figure of this Sidhas tradition in the Shivalik hills is Charpat Nath who was royal priest of Shahil Varman of Chamba. Fourth is Gorakhnath shrine at Jawalamukhi in district Kangra. There are so many Sidhas who have great importance in the hills but these four are inter- connected and story of their origin and presence overlapped.

Religious belief system of Himachal Pradesh is very vide and complex, due to the mixture of Hindu pantheon with localized cults. It is hard to know that how Vol. 6 Issue 6 (December 2020) Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Bijender Singh

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many cults and sects prevalent in the hills. The worship of Baba Balak Nath is observed by numerous people from the Punjab and other north Indian states. The origin does not have confirmation, but numerous Jana Sharuti sing praises to divinity of Baba Balak Nath. According to hagiographies and Jana sharuti, this boy in his previous birth was a parrot. When lord Shiva was narrating the Amarkatha (The Gospel of Immortality) to goddess Parvati, a parrot nestling incidentally heard the gospel of immortality. As lord Shiva realised that Parvati was sleeping and parrot heard the story, so he throw trident to kill parrot. As trident followed parrot nestling, he hide himself in the stomach of the wife of sage Vyasa and requested a promise of forgiveness from lord Shiva for coming out. The promise was that when parrot nestling would come out in human form, it along with all children born at that time might become eternal. Shiva agreed for that an extraordinary beautiful lad come out and vowed before Shiva for blessing. Baba Balak Nath is one the nine Nathas and eighty four Sidhas born at that time emanation of lord Shiva (www.speakingtree.in/blog/baba-balak-nath/m-lite).

H

In historical context cult of Naths developed in the region after the visit of the eighty four Sidhas to the Brahmaur region during 8th to 12th century A.D. The presence of Nath Sidhas in the region proven by the fact that one of them Charpat Nath became royal priest of Sahil Varman. Later Sahil Varman constructed a shrine over the cenotaph (Samadhi) of Charpat Nath. It is believed that Baba Balak Nath with these eighty four Sidhas visited Chamba State. Whereas in second version of his origin, Balak Nath was an ascetic boy, born at Girnar in Kathiawar was endowed with miraculous powers (Mamgain, 1975, pp 87). He spent some years studying at Benaras where he amazed his teachers with his precocious aptitude for learning. But this was to be a source of trouble with his parents, for when he returned home he discovered that they had arranged his marriage. Balak Nath decided that the life of a sanyasi held more attractions for him than the life of a householder. But he could not convince his father of this, and when his parents remained adamant in their determination that he should be married as soon as possible, he was obliged to run away from home to escape matrimony. He became a famous ascetic in spite of his youth and was renowned for his spiritual powers (Sharma, 1970, pp 139-149). He start living at Shah Talai, Tahsil Hamirpur, in the foothills, at that time a deserted spot, and even today hardly more than a village in spite of the comings and goings of the saint's numerous pilgrims. There he offered himself as a cowherd to a Lohar woman named Ratno. Every day his good employer gave him buttermilk (Chachh) and bread to take to the fields with him for his mid-day meal. But being a true ascetic he declined to eat this food, instead hiding it in the hollow trunk of a tree. At the end of a year's service he confronted Ratno with this hoard, which miraculously had not decayed and was still fresh and good. He beseeched her to accept what was her own property. Various stories are current about the other miracles which Balak Nath's powers enabled him to accomplish: for instance, how he could cause barren cows to give milk, or how he restored the wheat which his cows had trampled to its former upright state. But his trials were not over; for he was insist by the famous saint Gorakh Nath who

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desired him to join his band of yogis. Gorakh Nath would not accept his refusal when he politely explained that he preferred the solitary discipline of the hermit (Sharma, 1970, pp 140-141). This dialogue between two probably have some historical origin to the legend of Baba Balak Nath. Gorakhnath was noticed in the region during ten to twelfth century. Finally Balak Nath grew so weary of this badger that in despair he used his miraculous powers to escape by flying through the air. His dwelling place was a cave in the side of the mountain in which he kept a lamp burning day and night, and the name, by which he is widely known, *Deot Sidhs*, is said to be derived from the term for lamp (diva, deo in local dialect), *deo da Sidha*. Thus when the time came for Balak Nath to attain *Samadhi* he simply immured himself in his cave hermitage, and lives there still, according to local tradition.

The second entry of Sidhas noticed during the sixteenth century. The earliest Jakhbar documents narrating the story of establishment of Nath centres in the region. Some of them were paying annual tribute to the home shrine at Jakhbar. This must have been the custom of that time to get recognition and acceptance from such old shrines. According to the Jana Sharuti Balak Rupi was the brother of Balak Nath, whose origin is dated back to the seventeenth century. During eighteenth century Maharaja Sansar Chand of Kangra shifted his capital from Kangra to Sujanpur, which is near to the shrines of Sidha Balak Rupi and Balak Nath. He proclaimed himself as 'Sidha Sahaya' benefactor of Sidha. He had donated land to both shrines during his reign (AD 1775 - 1823). These donations confirmed the importance and influence of the Sidha centres. These shrines had a simple ritual structure. Only the morning and evening prayers were officiated by chelas (Sharma, 1996, pp 98). These stories were narrated by the mahant (head priest) of Balak Nath's shrine at Shah Talai and by ordinary villagers. They are an integral part of the living religious tradition of the area. When villagers worship Balak Nath it is not usually at Shah Talai but either at one of the many village shrines erected in his name or in their own homes. They may worship him in thanksgiving for some happy event, especially on the occasion of the birth of a cow or buffalo calf- perhaps on account of the saint's special association with cattle. They may make a vow to worship him conditional upon the saint rendering help in some way (e.g., by providing male offspring, ensuring success in an examination, or a plentiful harvest). In these respects the cult of Balak Nath is similar to those of other local saints and deities. If a special favour is sought of the saint a vow may be made to visit Shah Talai and to make an offering there. However, not all pilgrimages are made in fulfillment of vows. To some extent a pilgrimage is also in the nature of an outing for village people, enjoyable for its own sake as well as meritorious, and parties of men and women may arrange to travel together to worship at the shrine during the season of the year when there is little work to be done in the fields. The shrine at Shah Talai is situated near the summit of a pine covered hill. Save for a little bazaar where a few shops sell religious literature prints, and other items connected with the cult, there are no other buildings in the immediate vicinity of the shrine. The village of Shah Talai itself lays more than a mile away, at the foot of the steep and rocky slope where the little temple perches.

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The cave where Balak Nath is supposed still to dwell constitutes the inner sanctum of the shrine. Women are not allowed to enter this cave but must confine their devotions to worshipping the images of the saint in the outer shrine. Visitors bring offerings of various kinds, but there is one special type of gift which is traditionally made to Balak Nath - the gift of a live goat. Peasants often bring their own goats to offer, but they can also be bought in the local bazaar. What is particularly interesting about this practice is that the goats are never actually slaughtered but are presented at the shrine and then let loose there to roam about at large. I was told that many are in fact resold by the custodians of the shrine and the money used for its upkeep. A significant detail is the fact that the animal is closely observed when presented before the saint's image, and only when it trembles or twitches its skin is it regarded as having been accepted by the saint. This is so obviously similar to the custom current among many communities in India who practice animal sacrifice of only slaughtering an animal when it has been seen to shiver, that one is naturally led to wonder whether Balak Nath's goat are not a reminder of some now defunct sacrificial rite. Although animals are not slaughtered in honour of deities nowadays in the part of Kangra I studied, certain statements made by villagers suggested that such a practice bas indeed existed within living memory, at least in the case of certain specific cults.

In fact a curious local legend explains how a tiger which used to live near Balak Nath's hermitage complained that the presence of a vegetarian saint was embarrassing to him as he hardly liked to eat meat for fear of causing offence to his neighbor. "Please do not feel troubled," said Balak Nath. "I will ask my pilgrims myself to bring goats to my shrine. I will give them to you to eat and keep the other offerings for myself. Thus we shall both be satisfied and you need not feel embarrassed." This tale is recounted by villagers to explain the fact that goats are offered at Shah Talai but not slaughtered there. Other offerings are of course also made, especially rot (a kind of cake made from maize flour and unrefined sugar). But besides bringing offerings, the pilgrims to Shah Talai also receive from the saint. As in Hindu temples generally, the devotee receives prasad in the form of some kind of sweet which has been consecrated at the shrine. He is presented with prasad by the priest when he makes his offering at the shrine and usually takes enough with him to distribute among his family at home. He may also take with him vibhuti (ashes from the ritual fire burnt at the temple altar). These ashes are always kept very carefully since they are held to have healing and health-giving properties if consumed, as well as being impregnated with the sanctity of the shrine. This kind of ritual exchange- of prasad and vibhuti against the offerings of the worshipper- takes place at every Hindu temple or cult centre, but what I want to emphasize here is the fact that when pilgrims come from some distance to a shrine, the making of an offering against the receipt of prasad sets up a kind of sacred exchange system, a ritual traffic of sanctified goods over a considerable area (Sharma, 1970, pp 144-145). Gifts of money, food, goats, etc. are brought in by the pilgrims from their respective villages or towns, and when they return they take with them sacred goods which carry the sanctity of the central temple into their homes. This exchange creates a material link between the cult centre itself and the

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home of the most distant devotee, a network through which Baba Balak Nath's gift of prasad carries the holiness and prestige associated with his shrine to widely scattered places. Thus the spread of a cult is maintained not only by cultural messages propagated by its adherents or other agents but is also roughly coextensive with a network of active ritual ex- change. So far I have spoken of the Balak Nath cult as though it were only the cult of villagers. This is not quite true, for many pilgrims from Jullundur alight at the foot of the mountain and make their way up the steep slope to the shrine itself. Many of them were well-dressed and evidently far from poor. I am not sure exactly how far the geographical spread of the cult extends, but certainly it reaches all over district Kangra and well into the Punjab. The route which Punjabi pilgrims take to reach Shah Talai on foot from the plains passes close by the village where I was staying, and during the month of Asu (the usual time for making pilgrimages to Shah Talai) this path would be througed with men and women forming almost a non-stop procession. Travelling in bands, they carry flags and portraits of the saint, and sing his praises as they walk the stony footpaths, leading their goats for offering. These bands, I noticed, often included Sikhs as well as Hindus, in the early years of this century many Muslims were also counted among the devotees of Balak Nath. Village shrines dedicated to Balak Nath do not generally have any ritual specialists associated with them. Villagers worship at the shrines or in their homes without the mediation of any priest. The shrine at Shah Talai, however, has a regular staff of pujaris (ritual attendants) who look after it and perform rituals before the image of the saint twice a day. These rituals are not elaborate ceremonies using Sanskrit mantras (such as can be observed at some great Hindu temples) but consist mainly of the simple act of *aarati* (waving lights before the image) accompanied by prayers in the vernacular. In the Shivalik hills Sidha Shrines existed from long time and explained popularity by the number of shrines. Devotees from Punjab and Shivalik hills had great importance of Sidhas in their day to day life. Shrine at present time is under the government of Himachal Pradesh. It is managed by a committee headed by the Deputy commissioner District Hamirpur. The pujris are Brahmans by caste although the mahant himself is a Gosain. The office of pujris is hereditary, and that of mahant, if not actually passed from father to son, appears to have in fact remained within a certain family. The mahant has altogether a subordinate role in the Balak Nath cult compared with those other cults of region. He presides over the shrine at Shah Talai, spending a good deal of his time greeting pilgrims and distributing prasiad and vibhuti; yet it is the darshan of Balak Nath which the pilgrims come for, not that of the mahant, even though the latter is much respected and recognized as the spiritual successor of Balak Nath- his living representative (Sharma, 1970, pp 137-152).

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