

THE HARIHARA OF VALLAPUR

&

A HIDDEN ANCIENT SHAIVITE
CORRIDOR IN WESTERN HIMALAYAS



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Gurnal Project

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Sri Aurobindo Society
Creating the Next Future

Part of a special series entitled "From Kashmir to Haridwar" based on family history, anecdotes, cultural linkages and ancestry, by journalist Venus Upadhayaya.

To Gosain and Padhe, the two big households in Shivaliks that signified the respective pedigrees of my grandmother and grandfather. This piece of history is discovered through their interlinkages, Shaivite heritage and location in the Indus Civilization Basin.



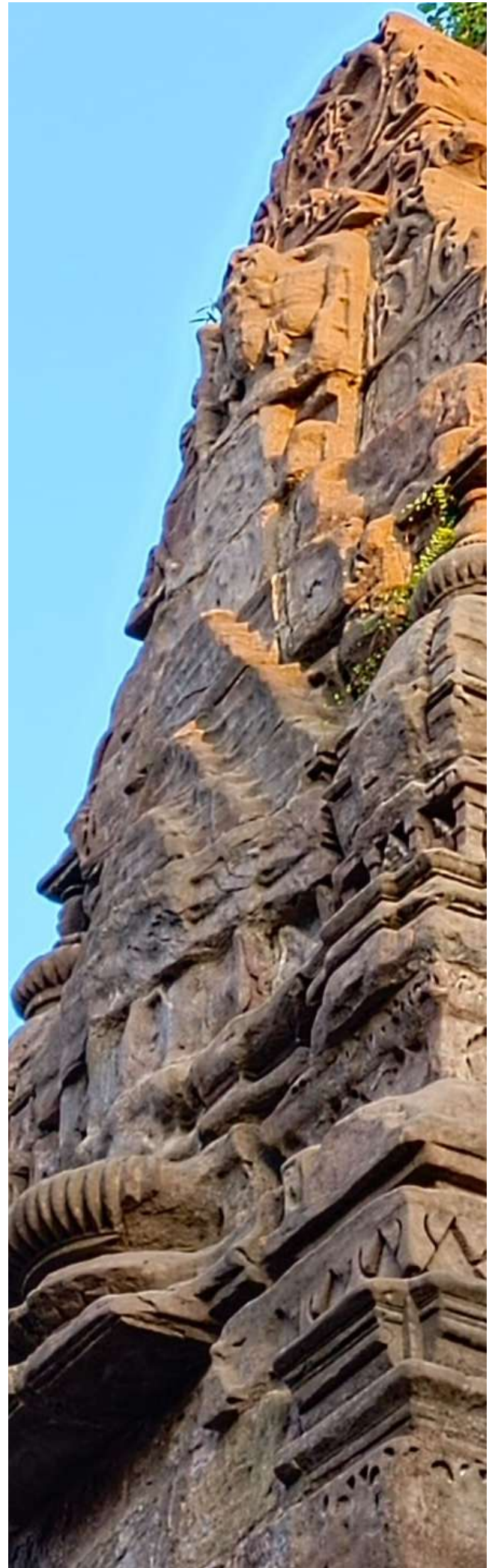
Harihara Temple, Billawar, Jammu.



Venus Upadhyayaya is a senior reporter, India, China and the Global South for the Epoch Times. She was born in Jammu and her ancestral home is in a village in the lower Shivalik ranges that are also home to Dogra/Pahadi culture. Her ancestral home has always fascinated her and this series is her journey to discover her roots. The Gurnal Project is her brainchild.

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From the Author

I'm a journalist. After the bloody conflict of Galwan happened I was asked to return to India because South Asia was becoming a more interesting geo-political theatre. Thus on Oct. 1, 2020 I left Washington and landed in India while the Covid pandemic raged high. My mind had to suddenly shift from a future of living in the US to adjusting back to Indian situations and news. I won't say it was all imposed and shocking—somewhere the pandemic had rekindled in me the longing for a home in my ancestral mountains and an assignment in New Delhi meant being near home.

A focus on South Asian geopolitical theatre meant focusing on India's northern borders with China and Pakistan and that's where it became a part of my job profile to understand my own place of origin in Jammu. It may sound ironic but until then I had never thought about my ancestral region in Western Shivaliks in geopolitical terms. It was just my home and the most picturesque escape. I had done some reporting from the border regions but it never went beyond a few stories.

Meanwhile the dream to set up a home in the mountains seemed unrealistic in 2020 for many reasons. The resulting void compelled me to ask myself some hard pressed questions about identity, heritage and what I'm inheriting other than the material wealth from my family. I realized much is lost--the ancestral home that was synonymous with traditions, values, cultural practices, language, celebrations and unique interpersonal relations was gone. Thus began my journey of discovering what was lost and whatever that could be reclaimed and given meaning in contemporary context. Wouldn't that be a sincere attempt at reclaiming a lost home?

Around this time I started to dig into the story of a mystery ancestor named Durodhayan. He was my grandfather's grand father and had travelled from western Himalayas' Shivalik region in what's today's Billawar in Kathua district to Haridwar in Central Himalayas before the mid-18th century by foot. On his return journey he travelled through Patiala and under some very dramatic circumstances got employed in the Patiala army which was then allied to the colonial rulers. Our family's story thus evolved differently from there but for me what this implied was that we have a real story of an ancestor who came from a warrior tradition of the hills and who was a traveller on ancient civilizational routes.

This inspired my first steps into researching lost civilizational routes between Kashmir and the rest of India. My great grandfather, Sant Ram Dogra was employed in the historical Kashmir Settlement or Bandobast Commissions in the early 20th century and in 1915 was appointed as an officer on special duty to codify the customs of Kashmir. He spent most of his professional life travelling across the Kashmir valley while maintaining a family and home in Billawar hills. Inspired by his and his father, Duryodhan's journey, I started authoring the series—Kashmir to Haridwar, discovering other interesting characters and stories from the community and family.

“The Bilkeshwar Temple of Vallapur and a Lost Shivalik Corridor of Western Himalayas” is a part of this series. Because it is unique and very significant vis-a-vis the lost history and civilizational identity of the



integrated northern Indian subcontinent, I requested Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS), and Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation to jointly publish it.

I'm also thankful to the École Française D'extrême-Orient (EFEQ), Pondicherry whose rich library was indispensable. I'm particularly thankful to Prof. R. Sathyanarayan from EFEQ with whom I first started discussing it in 2023.

In the end, this isn't about lost practices because ancient spiritual disciplines are never lost--they find true aspirants in different eras under different circumstances. Having said that it's important to mention that by writing this I don't claim to have found any lost religious doctrine. To me this appears the beginning of an historical discovery and it amply juxtaposes with lost heritage and persisting geopolitics of the northern regions and common heritage of the massive Indus river Basin spanning from Ladakh to Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan to eastern Afghanistan.

I wish for these civilizational routes to be revived wherever possible and converted into national and transnational education routes where innovation, new age professional skills and new life skills with universal values are reinstalled. I would call that as an attempt to reclaim the lost glory of Indus Valley Civilization. I wish for Jammu's ancient and medieval history to be discovered and given the place it deserves in evolving Indian discourse.

थुआढा मता-मता धन्नुवाद as they say in Dogri,

Venus Upadhyaya

A new stone sighted by the author in January 2025 at Gurnal (Billawar) in Kathua district of Jammu.





First Visit to the Harihara of Vallapur

Once in childhood, over three decades ago I visited Billawar, my ancestral region in Jammu Shivaliks with my father to meet some relatives and while on our way back we decided to wade through the Baisakhi mela that happened around the ancient Billkeshwar temple, also known as the Harihara temple.

I specifically remember—due to someone's nudge, probably of a relative, we walked into the sanctorum

where some new excavation by the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) had happened. We went in and saw many broken idols—but everything was so dusty and like something fresh from an earth's mound that it didn't stand out. I remember my father being told in the vernacular that it's a very important finding and people will start with the puja soon. I remember seeing one lit earthen lamp but nothing appearing quite like a conventional, colorful temple with idols that I was used to seeing in the Jammu city. I was too young to fathom history, archeology, architecture, heritage and geography, leave around any concept of Lakulisa-Pasupata sect or traditions of Nath Yogis\Kanphatiyas that today I subscribe to this place.

Billkeshwar temple was a J&K kingdom's monument until it was handed over to the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) in 1958. ASI sources say that the kingdom had done some conservation work in the 1940s. More work happened later under the ASI—major work was an excavation which dug out a pathway around the temple.

Fast forward through three decades of political, geopolitical, socio-economic changes—also characterized by the era of the onset of extremism and terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir—Billawar is more in news for numerous terrorist attacks and the recent 2024 elections. The temple stands as a conserved monument by the ASI but its traditions, ancient heritage and even its idols are unidentified. It's tantras lost!

In this context, there's much that has compelled me to write this report that seems to be becoming a book. First it's a part of my personal heritage and there's a great sense of urgency that if something isn't done soon, leave around the lost traditions that have gone out of life, the heritage and its rightly appreciative comprehension will also go away. Secondly the more I dig into my region's heritage the more I realize how this remote region was the location of an ancient architectural masterpiece which means there were people here with the knowledge of Shilpa shastras and other tantras with some connection with those in Central Himalayas and the Shivaite cult existing in Ellora. And more importantly they shared an architectural or built-form comprehension with those who built Hindu temples in the Indus river Basin in what's today's Pakistan.

An architectural masterpiece such as the tenth-century Billkeshwar temple would involve masters who would also identify with an operating school of thought and an ancient lineage of masters. As Dr. R. Sathyanarayana from the Ecole Francaise D'Extreme-Orient Pondicherry told me that such a temple in the mountainous terrain implies a major center of knowledge and cultural heritage in the region.

A major center characterized by such an architectural masterpiece of a temple would also mean officiating deities, presiding priests, tantris or oracles each with a system of rituals and structure of lineage, and multiple interlinkages with the polity and the royalty of that time.

Vasundhara Filliozat and Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat write in their introduction to “Kalamukha Temples of Karnataka” (1) that during the period of Chalukya kings of Kalyaan, when their rule extended from Godavari to Kaveri, Saiva religion in the form of Pasupata and Kalamukha movements was predominant.

“These religious movements were well organized under the direction of lineages of learned gurus, who ran Sanskrit schools, and who, being preceptors of kings and chieftains, advised them to build temples.”

In my early teens I read Jawala Sahai's Gulabnama in Dogri--the book was in my father's collection from his days as a student of Shiromani--the BA course of Dogri. I remember one particular page talked about Billawar and it specifically got registered in my memory because it said in history Billawar was a town of very learned people. It pointedly talked about someone from history who could tell future events with the precision of not only day but even time. My father's collection got eaten by termites and until in the very recent past I wasn't able to trace the Dogri book anywhere--it's out of print. In fact the latest English translations of Gulabnama miss some important pages which might likely be added information by the Dogri translator.

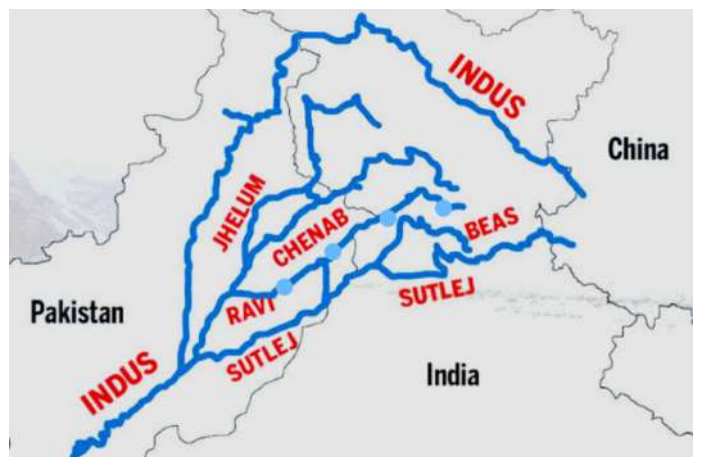
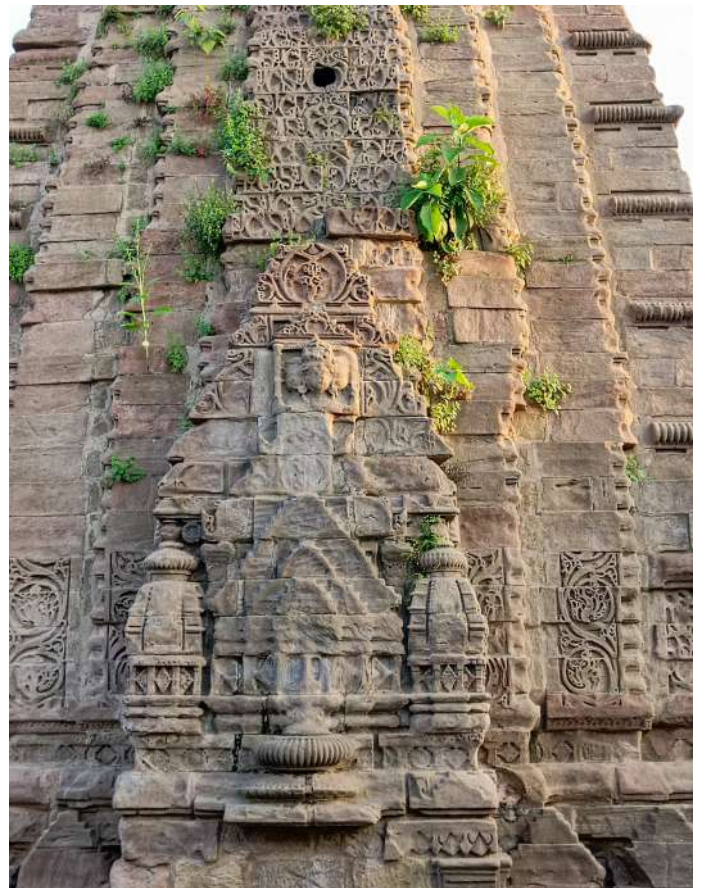
It's important to lay this context to understand the history of genius in this region because through it we can trace the sciences that raised their acumen to mastership. Knowledge heritage further signifies something very important about temples in Indian civilization context and that's, they were always the center of knowledge and wisdom seeking people of their times--people proficient in the tantras/shastras of astronomy, biology, ayurveda, music and other cultural, scientific studies.

Without any doubt Vallapur, the ancient Shaivite corridor between the Ravi and Ujh rivers, two important Indus tributaries, was one such civilizational corridor in the ancient northern Indian subcontinent.

Just like Ellora was on an ancient route connecting places on Godavari river with Aurangabad, Maheshwar and Ujjain (2), Vallapur was on a well-travelled, ancient route connecting places on Ravi in the Shivaliks with the foremost river feeding glaciers--Sonbain Ashapati glacier and Kailash Kund glacier--in the Western himalayas in Bharderwah.

It was an ancient pilgrimage geography connected further with worlds in higher himalayas, trans himalayas, gangetic plains and the larger Indus river basin.

Today, it'll be only right to call it a part of the rich ancient and medieval Dogra heritage. And it's very important to do so before this heritage gets completely lost and further overtaken by pervading narratives of terrorism and conflict in the region.



The dotted river is Ravi, the southern boundary of Jammu and the northern boundary of Punjab. It originates from Bharderwah ranges and crosses the border to flow into Pakistan.

Dynamic Himalayan Geography & Civilizational Connectivity

To understand this civilizational corridor and its medieval heritage, the first and the most important thing to understand is the geography that defines the pertinent connectivity of this region. First tar road came to the region in the early 1950s, until then the region was connected through river beds and mountain passes. Despite the new age of satellite navigation, this connecting geography still stands at its place, lending us an amazing peep into how people commuted in history through it.

This geography is still used by the nomadic tribes, pastoralists, terrorists and infiltrators, so it's not a bygone preposition. Moreover people in their 90s and 80s still exist to narrate their travels through this corridor.

Let's begin with understanding the South-east side of the Indus river basin. The Indus river basin today is a transboundary region spanning across four countries--Afghanistan, China, India and Pakistan. This basin is particularly notable for its Himalayan and trans-himalayan rivers that connect the Tibetan plateau with the Arabian sea and their catchment stands as a bridge between the Oxus river basin in Central Asia and the Gangetic river basin in the Indian mainland. In the mid-19th century all the European exploratory expeditions to Central Asia and Tibet started from the Indus River basin with Srinagar being the last camping city in many cases(3).

Most of these famous exploratory expeditions happened on foot(3)--in fact they were a prelude to the infrastructural development that marked most of the 20th century geo-politics. All these expeditions happened by foot or on horses and they all happened through the natural features--meaning rivers, mountain passes and high grasslands of an extremely dynamic geography. This geography continues to stand as such despite a bloody geo-political realignment and disputed boundaries that happened since 1947. In fact this geography is synonymous with the routes connecting civilization even in antiquity.

The extreme south east portion of the Indus-river basin is marked by river Ravi, one of the five rivers that gave Punjab its name. Ravi, thus a major tributary of Indus defines the northern boundary of Indian Punjab and the Southern boundary of Jammu and Kashmir--creating a unique trijunction with Himachal Pradesh and Punjab. In Maharaja Gulab Singh's time, after his Amritsar Treaty with the British in 1846, the Ravi river marked the southern periphery of his kingdom with Punjab.

The region between Ravi and its most important tributary called Ujh stands as the gateway from Punjab to the Shivalik hills and this is the historic civilizational corridor we are talking about. Its historic significance and its ancient heritage is defined by its geographic location and connectivity. Most importantly its geographic placement determined its connectivity through multiple sides from Chamba in Himachal Pradesh, from Pathankot in Punjab, from Gurdaspur, Eminabad and Sialkot in undivided Punjab or today's Pakistan, from Trikuta hills through the Mansar-Surinsar Corridor, from Doda and Kishtwar through Bhaderwah and from Tibet and Ladakh through Kishtwar and from Kashmir through Ramban.

It means that while one way of entering Delhi from further north of the sub-continent was through Lahore from the western side, another way of entering Delhi was from this side as was proved by the presence of the kings of hilly states in the Mughal Court(4). This also means that for civilization in the historic past an important way to travel from lesser himalayas to high himalayas and to trans-himalayan heights was from here as well.

By understanding the mountain routes between these regions and juxtaposing it with their living culture and folklore, it becomes easier to develop a unique comprehension of this region's placement in history. This dynamic Himalayan geography is important to understand the history of Shaivism which was largely operated by ascetics since the ancient past. And forests, foot-routes, mountain passes and river catchments because of being the natural routes for their hikes to high altitude himalayan pilgrimage spots are lined by their built heritage, milestones and stories. This is one such story of natural geographical connectivity, civilizational heritage and lost traditions!



Bani has multiple SHIVA and SHAKTI temples but the author has studied only two--one the 500-year-old Basak nag temple in Panyalag village and another Shiva temple in Dandyali village. Panyalag was en route from Bhaddu-Billawar to Bhaderwah and Dandyali was on foot-route from Basohli to Bhaderwah.

Why is this Geography an Ancient Shaivite Corridor?

This catchment is defined by the region between Ravi and Ujh enclosed by the Kailash range in Bhaderwah on one side and Agli dhar range of Kathua on the other. Within this corridor there are multiple Shaivite heritage spots that incidentally also mark milestones on ancient foot routes defined by a very dynamic Himalayan geography as explained above. Some of these are Archaeological Survey of India monuments and some are still unidentified and in ruins. Here's a list followed by a detailed description:

- Trilochan Nath Temple : Basoli (ASI)
- Harihara or Bilkeshwar temple : Billawar (ASI)
- Gurnal Historic Site: Billawar (unidentified)
- Ancient Mukhalinga: Panjthirithi, Bhaddu (unidentified)
- Kailash Kund: Bhaderwah (Lake) Sacred geography

The destination of this entire corridor or the extreme periphery of this Shaivite corridor is Kailash Kund lake at the base of Mt. Kablas--the lake is at a height of 14,241 feet above sea level in Bhaderwah.

Among the surrounding hill locks of Kailash Kund there are other equally big lakes like Rishi dal (lake) and Kal dal while there are also many smaller sacred ones in the region. The names of the lakes speak of their sacredness.

The origin of the Ujh river also lies in the Baderwah ranges. It's interesting to draw a comparative between these ranges hosting Kailsah Kund with the Mansarovar lake in Tibet that's another important seat of Shaivism and an important destination for Shivite pilgrims. Mansarovar lake is also surrounded by many other sacred lakes and mountains and has been the ultimate periphery or destination of Himalayan pilgrimage since antiquity. While Mansarovar is the source of important rivers like Indus, Brahmaputra and Sutlej—Kailash Kund is the source of River Tawi, the lifeline of Jammu known in antiquity as “Suryaputri” and other important tributaries of Chenab and Ravi.

More importantly, as in the case of every pilgrimage route, there's a story from ancient texts that places the pilgrim's faith in the sacred lake and the rivers that originate from it. These stories intertwine an amazing world connecting it with temples and villages on the routes that lead to it. These stories and the faith embedded in them is also the inspiration and purpose behind humanity's journeys through these sacred routes and the settlements along it.

While Kailash-Mansarovar is revered as the perpetual abode of Lord Shiva, Bhaderwah and Kailash Kund is the home of Vasak Nag, the king of the nagas whom Shiva wears around his neck. In geographical juxtaposition this could actually symbolize/mean an ancient route to Kailash Mansarovar, the abode of Shiva, from the West of Himalayas.

People in these regions call him Basak nag.

We'll define two major routes to Kailsash Kund to comprehend the ancient Shaivite corridor between Ravi and Ujh and we'll study identified and unidentified ancient heritage on these routes to investigate historical transit of humanity on these routes. For the purpose of comprehension I'm simply calling these—Route one and Route two.

Route One starts from Ravi and thus connects Kailash Kund with regions south of Ravi like Pathankot and Kangra--this is thus the route from Gangetic plains.

Route two connects Kailash Kund with Ujh and the regions north of Ujh like Jammu and Sialkot--this is thus the route directly linked to the ancient Grand Trunk road and the ancient Silk Route.

Route One's threshold to the catchment between Ravi and Ujh lies in the ancient town of Basoli and goes from Boond to Bani to Sarthal to Bhaderwah while “Route Two's” threshold lies at Panjtirthi in Bhaddu and goes from Billawar to Badnota to Daggarr to Panyalag to Kailash Kund.

People living in the catchment between Ravi and Ujh which includes my paternal community used both these routes depending upon from where they were commuting and to where they were going.

Route One

Route one starts from Basoli on the bank of the Ravi--it's actually the gateway from what's today India's Punjab to the Jammu Shivaliks. This gateway is also the trijunction between Kathua, Kangra and Pathankot districts of today's J&K, Himachal and Punjab respectively.

Basoli in Kathua district is an extremely historical town with four identified and conserved historical sites by the Archeological survey of India. One conserved Shaivite ASI site which I have studied is the Trilochannath temple, a medieval period temple dedicated to Lord Shiva that's dated by ASI to be 10-11th century C.E. It's situated on the bank of the river Ravi at Mahadera, a village about a mile to the west of Basoli town. The latter is broadly also the site of the Basoli fort and palaces. The literal translation of Mahadera means the settlement of the Shiva. Ravi is now dammed into Ranjit Sagar Dam which is visible from the temple.

Ram Chandra Kak, a pioneering Kashmiri archeologist in the Dogra period who later on became the kingdom's Prime Minister from 1945-47 talked about Trilochannath temple and Mahadera village in his book, “Antiquities of Basoli and Ramnagar” (5). Kak's documentation in certain cases is the only documentation available on many of these sites, some of which are encroached, further ruined or non-existent today.



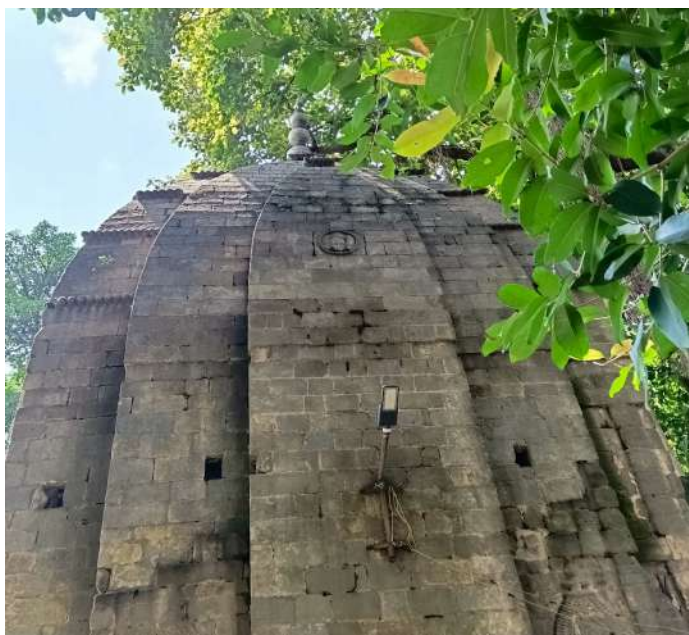
Trilochannath temple, an ASI monument on the bank of the Ranjit Sagar Dam in Basoli town of Kathua, J&K UT.

Currently, this is what the ASI board at Mahadera heritage site says about Trilochannath temple:

“Trilochannath temple is a beautiful specimen of art and architecture of the medieval period. This temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is built of limestone blocks. On plan, it consists of a square sanctum and an antarala. The beautiful stone doorframe of the sanctum shows three sakhis decorated with floral motifs, lotus petals and human figures. The center of the lintel shows the image of Ganesha while two shaiva dwarpalas stand on either side of the opening.

The sanctorum from outside shows a panchratha plan. All the rathas have been taken to the top. The mouldings of the base are surmounted with a band consisting of lotus petal over which runs a panel showing images of Vishnu, Garuda, Devi with Lion, Rama and other gods. The jangha portion is decorated with miniature shrines intraspaced with geometrical designs.

All the central rathas are crowned with amalakkas and Bhadra mukhas showing the three aspects of Shiva. The Sikhara is crowned with a square amalaka whose four sides are decorated with Bhumi amalakas. The domical roof of the interior of the sanctum in receding tiers shows an inverted lotus in the centre. On stylistic basis, the temple can be dateable to 10th-11th century C.E.”



The Bhadramukha on the Siva-Mahadeva showing the three aspects of Siva at the Shikara of Trilochannath in Basoli.

The entire route from Basoli to Bani is interspread with many small Shaivite shrines, bowlis (freshwater built springs/aquifers)--more importantly they are also home to many oracles (called Chelas in vernacular) who are custodians of Shaivite, Shakta and Naga traditions since many generations. They continue to live, uphold their traditions and annual pilgrimages to Kailash kund and other important shrines in the region. Incidentally the regions in this route are home to people with shared genetics and culture with what's today's Himachal, Punjab and the Central Himalayan belt.

On route one, I witnessed another centuries old limestone temple at Dandyadi village with amalakha and bhadra-mukha and inverted-lotus ceiling as in the case of Trilochannath temple in Basoli. This temple is unconserved, unidentified, has been tampered inside with modern building material but still has two small ancient idols. According to locals it was built by the rulers of Basoli and that seemingly is the case keeping in mind the similarity between it and the Trilochannath temple. The Route 2 passes just three miles away from this temple from a village called Panyalag which hosts another four-century old temple of Vasaknag built by Bhoopat Pal, a Basoli ruler who existed between 1573 and 1642 and died in a conspiracy in the court of Mughal ruler, Shah Jahan (4). I'll discuss this in detail under Route two.



Temple at Dandyali from the backside.



Renovated temple at Panyalag.

The Route Two

The Route Two starts from Panjtirthi--the confluence point of five rivers including the four tributaries of Ujh--Tarnah, Sootarkhad, Tunadi Khad and Bheni. At the confluence is a massive rock on which stands a small temple enshrining an ancient panch mukhalinga (five faced shiva linga). It is unidentified by ASI or State Conservation Department but is in worship and is a part of the historical narration by local historians as well as the folklore(6).

Panjtirthi is basically like a gateway into the Shivalik hills from across the Agli dhar range from Kathua side of India or the Eminabad\Lahore side of what's today marked by Pakistan's Punjab. The antiquities of the mukhalinga and its presence on a civilizational route does find its record in history.

Dogra historian Shiv Nirmohi talks about a folklore about Raja Thanpal born in the 42nd generation of Pandavas (of Mahabharata lore) who established a kingdom over what's today's Almora in Uttarakhand (Central Himalayas). Thanpal's son, Bhogpal left the kingdom in Almora to his brother and moved over to the lower Shivalik hills of my region to try his luck(6). He came across the ancient Shiva temple at Panjtirthi and mesmerized by the natural beauty of the region, he decided to establish rule over the region in 700 AD or 7th century. The important thing to note here is the already existing mukhalinga when he arrived at Panjtirthi and he established his rule by defeating an existing ruler called Rana Billo(6).

The history of the last two centuries further provides multiple inferences and evidences to connectivity through this corridor. This route basically is defined by the floodplain of Ujh on both sides of the Agli dhar range. Along this floodplain there are two important forts from Maharaja Gulab Singh's time--the fort of Jasrota, the first gateway from Lahore to the Jammu Shivaliks and the Fort of Mastgarh on the hill overlooking Panjtirthi. The presence of Forts along these major milestones along Ujh proves that this was the route connecting people and armies until about two centuries ago when Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh was integrated by Maharaja Gulab Singh into a single Kingdom.

After signing the treaty of Amritsar, on his way to Jammu, the Maharaja alighted at Jasrota and honored his Dewan (Prime Minister), Jawala Sahi with ten thousands gold coins(7) for his services in facilitating the treaty with the British. Even during Maharaja Gulab Singh's time, Sahai's family had a history of over three centuries of economical and militarily influential presence in Eminabad, the region between Jammu Shivaliks and Lahore. The Eminabad family was noted by the British in their list of the most influential families of Punjab just because of where they were placed and what they were capable of(8).

In the early 1900s, my great grandfather, Sant Ram Dogra's assistant was from a village near Dyalachak on what's today Jammu-Pathankot highway and he would come home by foot by crossing the Agli dhar to deliver great grandfather's salary home and to also deliver messages since great grandfather was posted in Kashmir during Maharaja Pratap Singh's time. He was my family's only source of news about Dogra who was killed in his early forties and so every time in childhood when we crossed Dayalachak and reached a picturesque valley, my father would point at the mountains and the passes in the front to explain the route he took to travel and the stories he narrated.

During my grandfather's time, British doctors would camp at the Chowgan (ground) of Bhaddu and they would travel from Lahore by the same route--crossing over the Agli dhar range on horses by the dry river bed into Panjtirthi and from there further ascending to Bhaddu.

The massive floodplain of Panjtirthi remains dry for most of the year with just a stream or two of water meandering through it except for monsoons when it floods incessantly and dangerously. One can get a panoramic view from the balcony of the temple--of mountains and passes leading to Udhampur\Kashmir starting from left to Bani\Bhaderwah in the center to Chamba and Kangra on the extreme right. Isn't that an easy definition of an important connectivity corridor?



The snow covered peaks in the front are the Paddar, Kishtwar ranges as visible from Panjtirthi.

A Tantrik Poet and His God of Sapphire

Route two has an important story of a historic character from Bhaddu and the most notable Dogra poet ever--Kavi Dattu or Devdat who found Chatur-mukhi Shiva idol of neelam or sapphire in the forests of Bhaddu and escaped through the Agli Dhar when the King of Bhaddu demanded that the precious idol be given to him, according to the oral lore.

Kavi Dattu, the author of "Krishna Mahima Stotra" was born in Bhaddu and was the court poet of King Prithvipal during the 18th century.

I would have never known this story had my father's eldest sister not shared it with me when I visited her home in Ghagwal in childhood.

Childhood's fascination never fades and very recently I reached her home wanting to know the story and see the idol.

It's then that I came to know, my aunt's husband's maternal lineage came from Kavi Dattu. Dattu found a multi-face idol in the forests around Bhaddu which even today are thick and green. The king of Bhaddu wanted to possess it but Dattu refused to give it to him and escaped to the kingdom of Jasrota on the other side of Agli Dhar and sought political asylum. My aunt describes Dattu as a tantric of high order.

This led to a war between Jasrota and Bhaddu in which the latter was defeated. Thus Dattu settled in that region where the Gaud Brahmin community that descended from his lineage along with the Sapphire idol still exists.

The idol of Sapphire in itself signifies much about this connectivity corridor. In Jammu and Kashmir, Sapphire or Neelam is found only in Paddar, Kishtwar. The state mines were actually discovered only in 1881. Though first industrial mining started then, humanity likely has known the Paddar Sapphire before as well.

It's important to mention here that the Dogras marched to Ladakh in the 1840s from the Paddar route. I can't establish if the Sapphire of Kavi Dattu's idol came from Paddar but it certainly indicates connectivity.

Magnificence of the Temples of Route Two

Along Route two, the Billkeshwar temple in Billawar is the most important heritage spot. Infact this appears to be the center of this entire Shivite corridor. The Billkeshwar temple stands in Billawar, a town on the confluence of two important rivers--Naj and Bheni, two tributaries of Ujh that meet at the entrance to Billawar and flow towards Panjirthi as Bheni. In the catchment of these rivers there's a place called Babrey-da-nal from where a battalion of first Mughal ruler, Babur's army marching towards Delhi passed through when he was on his way to Delhi.

The Billkeshwar temple, also called the Harihara temple stands on the hill on the bank of Naj while on the opposite bank of Naj is the ancient town of Gurnal littered (9) with many ruins and beautifully built, big as well as several small bowlis or built aquifers.



The Naj river--the green patch in the forefront is the outer edge of Billawar while the opposite visible bank is Gurnal.

The Billkeshwar temple finds its mention in the published references of M.A. Stein(ed.), Kalhana's Rajatarangini (Bombay 1892) and in Ram Chandra Kak's Antiquities of Basoli and Ramnagar (New Delhi 1972).(10)

Ruined Township of Gurnal

Gurnal finds a detailed mention in Kak's work in which he mentions the presence of a temple built in Nagara style and many bowlis at the site (9).



Entrance to the biggest bowlis in Gurnal.

Locals mention that the temple is the seat of "Vindhyavasini devi" who's represented by just a stone in a shallow, natural rocky trough in the earth that Kak (5) called in his documentation as "pranali on the floor".



This representation is similar in form to the Devi representation in Parmandal temple--another ancient Shaivite premises on the bank of Devika river in today's Samba district. My maternal ancestors were once priests in this temple that in recent history was repaired and patronized by Maharaja Gulab Singh. My maternal grandmother talks about the samadhi of my grandfather's uncle in Purmandal. Incidentally during my travels through these Shivite monuments, I found Shaivite ascetic samadhis in several places including in the premises of Trilochannath and Billkeshwar temple.



The Gurnal temple is unconserved and in recent years has been tampered with modern building materials to the extent that to a first time visitor it'll not even stand out. During and after monsoons the entire site gets badly overgrown by vegetation.

Incidentally locals believe that in history a Kashi like city was being built at Gurnal and it was abandoned due to some reasons unknown today (11). The presence of many bowlis is used to illustrate this point as all sacred cities were on the banks of the rivers and along connectivity corridors. The presence of the many bowlis could be because of the fact that unlike Ganga, Naj is a much smaller river that remains dry except for the monsoons. Plus this place's hydrogeology has supported building multiple aquifers and that's why unlike perennial Ganga, bowlis play the role of perennial sacred water spots here.

Kak's description of Gurnal(5) indicates a place with lost glory. He mentions the presence of "few fragmentary images" from "older times and temples" around the goddess temple in Gurnal. The most descriptive among them are the idols of chauri-bearer and four-armed Bhairava.

Kak wrote: "The principal among them are these: (1) This is a well carved Chauri-bearer crowned with a three-peaked tiara."

The existence of this beautiful idol now survives only in Kak's documentation and no one including the ASI officials in Jammu know its whereabouts. By following Kak's description and images in his book, one can surely make out the acumen of those involved in designing and building the ancient religious township of Gurnal.



This is how Kak described the Chauri-bearer of Gurnal: "The modeling of the breasts (now unfortunately much damaged) and the hips is very beautiful. The yak's tail of the chauri is wavy. She wears a couple of garlands, one of which goes down almost to her ankles, while the other nearly reaches the knees; and a jeweled necklace, the central jewel of which hangs between the breasts down to her waist. The figure probably formed part of a group which may have been like a Vishnu group of Kashmir, as is attested by the fragmentary garlands on her left side. Her drapery is transparent."

Kak also talked about the fragmentary image of a "four-armed Bhairava" of the "same age" whose two hands were broken when he saw them. Bhairava's upper right hand held a mace and the lower left was "held down stretched outwards."

"His hair comes down in long braids over his shoulders, while in front it is brushed upwards. He wears round ear ornaments, a necklace, armbands, bracelets, an ornamental waistband, a short dhoti, a sacred thread, and a long garland reaching below the knees. The ends of his scarf fly outwards at the sides."

Kak describes three more fragments including the "fragment of a hand" with a ring on each finger. Today there are a few extremely defaced and worn out fragments inside the sanctorum.

Kak also mentioned a "triangular stone" with "the figure in high relief of Garuda" (5) which he described as "very similar to those in the temples of Kashmir." This is no longer visible in the courtyard of the Gurnal temple where Kak saw it but his description demands attention:

"The fact that the stone is triangular would suggest that it belonged to the apex of a niche, as is the case there. The upper part of its body is human, with its locks flowing below the shoulders. The lower half is that of a bird. In place of arms it has wings, of which the left is broken. It has a bird's tail, wears a necklace, and is known as "Launkada bir."

Kak said “Launkada Bir” signified “the heroic boy” or “bold urchin”--however he expressed doubt about its meaning. Incidentally, Launkada bir in today’s Dogri culture is the generic name of the boy who gets worshiped along with the nine kanyas during navratri in the region. He continues to be called “Bir Launkada.”



Around Gurnal, Kak mentions the presence of 101 Bowlis--one of which he describes in detail as “dharmandvi”. Local historian Shiv Dobia mentions the presence of 365 springs .

Locals keep unearthing bowlis--since the whole land is gently sloping towards the river and remains under paddy cultivation, the unkept bowlis keep getting filled-up seasonally. That's why people keep unearthing them regularly while plowing except for a few big ones which remain in local use.



Dharmandvi--the most notable bowl of Gurnal.

Dharmandvi is probably the only bowl which still exists with the features that Kak described. While Kak mentions its historic context to only a few centuries, the walled bowl was dated to be at least 1600 years old from the Gupta Period by late Prof. Y.B. Singh who visited it during his lifetime (11).

However, every time I visit it, I witness its worsening condition. Each time during my visit, I also get introduced to new bowlis which locals keep unearthing. One can make out they were built and are not just natural aquifers by their brick lined walls. I first visited Gurnal in childhood and since the last five years I have been visiting it annually.

The Masterpiece Bilkeshwar Temple



Until about three decades ago my family and larger community was commuting between Bhaddu, our ancestral village, to Billawar, Dullangal and Bani for work and for friendships and extended family relations. Our big, joint family home in Bhaddu in my early childhood was like a meeting point for our community spread across the wider region. Festivities and occasions like birth, deaths and weddings were occasions for huge gatherings.

In those days of bad roads and lack of commuting facilities, people would still take the pain to travel on occasions of importance to the community. Villages weren't connected by roads to highways, buses were fewer on the routes, there were no personal means of transport and people walked. My memories of walking to our ancestral home from the base town and to the homes of relatives in other villages is still fresh. So it's not inconceivable to understand the agility possessed by people in these hills and how faith, pilgrimage and family relations played an important role in maintaining connectivity.

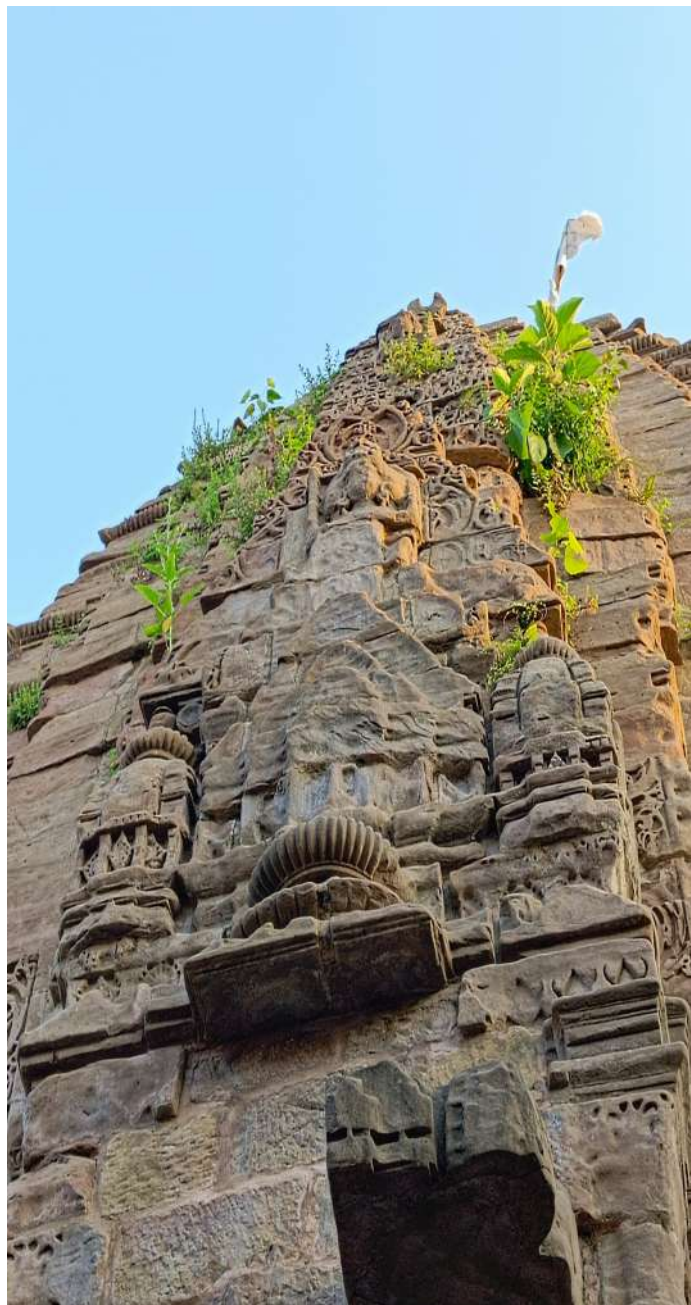
This culture of connectivity existing in the Shivalik hills is not unique to Jammu--those who have been for family, pilgrimage and hiking to Himacahal and Uttarakhand ranges would vouch for the same culture. This civilizational connectivity is important to understand, Bilkeshwar temple and the many layers of Sivaism ingrained in its unexcavated history.

Before we go into my experience, analysis and documentation of the Billeshwar temple, let's go through what Kak and ASI say about it.

Kak writes in "Antiquities of Basoli and Ramnagar" (5) that the "town of Ballaur is an ancient one." Nirmohi emphatically refers Rajtarangi to highlight how the ruler of Vallapur was present in the court of Raja Kalas (1063-89) of Kashmir and Vallapur was under his suzerainty (6).

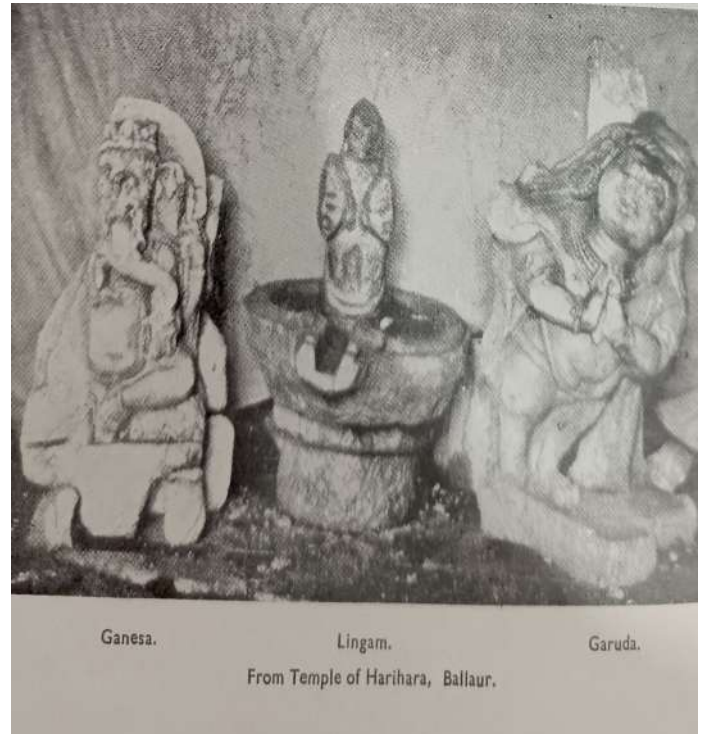
"The testimony of the Rajatarangini of Kashmir regarding the antiquity of the principality of Ballapura is corroborated by the existence (unfortunately in a very ruined condition) of a fine medieval temple. It is known as the temple of Harihara, but is held especially sacred to Siva," wrote Kak.

A Vallapur princess named, Jajla was married to Kashmir's king, Susral and the ancient town also finds its mention in the work of Albruni (1030). According to Nirmohi this indicates that Vallapur was an well-known place in north India in the 10th century (6).



This is how Kak describes the temple of Vallapur: "The spire is profusely ornamented externally (Pl. VI.), the ornament consisting mainly of floral scrolls, flower and vase decoration, and niches with stepped pedimental roofs filled with decorative lozenges and figures of gods. A pleasing contrast of light and shade is produced by the re-entering angles of three offsets on each side. The vertical portion of the temple may be divided into two parts: (1) the lower, rising up to the floor level of the niches, consists chiefly of quirked ovolo (the lowest course), torus and fileted torus courses, placed amidst plain fileted ones. (2) From this upwards are two rows of ornamental niches placed one above the other in each offset. On a level with the top of these decorative temples are ribbed courses, the powermost panel being ornamented with floral scrolls. The ornamentation on the outermost offset is carried up to the finial. On each side are two stone slabs bearing three-headed busts; one is just below the apex of the roof of the outermost offset and the other below the top of the spire. The image in the niche on the external face of the southern wall of the porch is that of Siva."

Kak has listed thirteen sculptures in the shrine and has highlighted that they were fragmentary. Infact they remain so even today but despite a tradition that demands fragmentary idols be not worshiped, the locals keep being ritualistic towards them. Very recently the ASI has encased them in glass frames to prevent them from further abrasion.



The ASI Srinagar circle under which this temple comes is yet to study and decipher the idols found in the temple. However Kak's list is extensive and it includes fragmentary idols of Vishnu, three figures of Ganesha, Panchmukhalinga, Brahma, a female chauri-bearer, a pair of feet on an ornamental base, figure of votary (bhairava) with folded hands and broken bull of limestone outside in the mandapa.

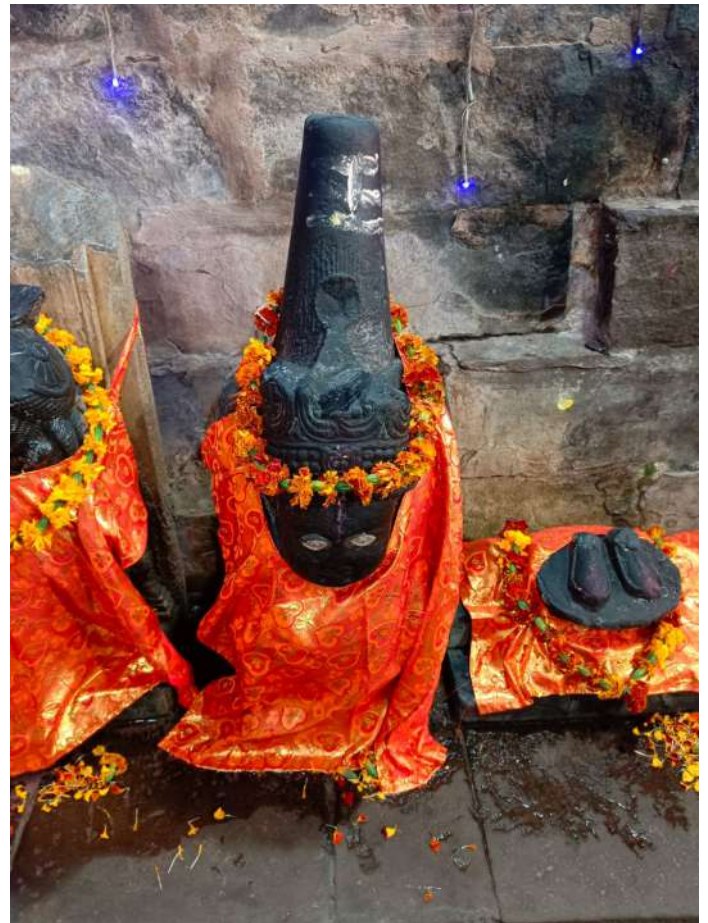
But what interests an onlooker the most among Kak's list of thirteen which even exists today and are placed inside the temple, under unaware worship are two multifaceted busts with projections on the top which likely served as "tenon of a finial," according to Kak.



This is how Kak describes the most striking of the two, the four-headed bust (5) :

"This four headed bust is actually the centerpiece of the sanctum of Billkeshwar temple. The bust appears placed on a special pedestal which Kak defines quite melodramatically as a "square block, sloping upwards, and ornamented by a triangular projection on each side. This is surmounted by a four-headed bust (really there are four busts of four heads). Each head wears a necklace. In the corners in front and back, just where the nipples of the breast ought to be, are carved heads reclining sideways. The ear ornament is a circular jeweled disc. The heads are adorned with three crescented or peaked crowns. Over the head is a further eight--sided projection, which probably served as the tenon of a finial. It seems probable that this stone was the crowning ornament of the apex of a spire (perhaps of the temple itself). If the figure is that of Brahma, the four minor heads may represent the embodied Vedas."

Another thing which strikingly stands out for me "is a pair of feet on an ornamental base." The figure on the top has been visibly broken and missing and it remains as such to this day. While discussing this pair of feet wearing shoes, I have always questioned experts about why these feet are covered while in the South India no such thing is found.



"Your region is cold," Dr. Sathyanarayanan has told me the same twice jokingly. However the construct of this pair of shoes is an important preposition to consider an historic perspective of this monument.

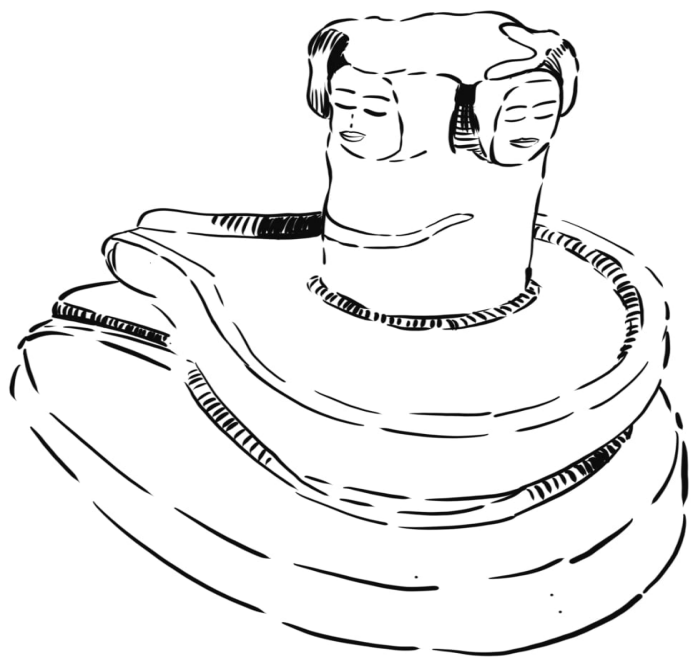
To understand this it's important to understand this pair of ancient shoes from the perspective of those traveling on these ancient routes--and the climate of the region and the activity of those who wore it. The shoes appear somewhat like the Punjabi juti or traditional Punjabi shoes for men but unlike what's worn by men even today in the climate of Punjab this specimen of a shoe doesn't stop at the metatarsal bones or the bridge of the foot, it extends over the tarsal bones upto the ankles. The stitch line, remarkably visible in the shoes even today makes this amply clear. Such shoes are obviously worn in very cold climatic regions by those who get to walk long distances. They are very close to the traditional shoes worn even today in Kishtwar and Baderwah region. They actually appear like Tibetan shoes. They could be the remains of a sculpture of a king or a knight who probably would have been the builder or a patron of the temple or a ruler of the region. This Kishtwar-Bhaderwah connectivity is quite likely the case because until very recently the "route two" was the secured route of commute to Baderwah. From Bhaderwah the next region higher up is Kishtwar and Kishtwar's connectivity with Ladakh and Tibet is a part of documented history. General Zoravar Singh marched into Ladakh through the Paddar-Kishtwar route.

Lost Lakulisa-Pasupata Heritage

In the course of my travel and research to understand my personal heritage, I have come across many scattered pieces of a puzzle that point out towards this catchment between Ravi, Ujh and Kailash and Agli dhar ranges to be an important ancient seat of Lakulisa-Pasupata Shivism. To me it appears that much of the architectural heritage existing today in the region is medieval but the Lakulisa-pasupata history of this region seems to far predate that. I'm not in a position to decipher its antiquity and I leave it to historians to fathom.

We'll take up each feature, temple or heritage site that denotes a Lakulisa-Pasupata connection in this corridor and discuss it in detail here:

Mukhalinga at Panjirthi: Panjirthi has a pachmukhalinga installed on a tall cliff at the confluence. These days people take a stairway to the top of the cliff but in my father's childhood people would climb the cliff as they still do in villages with less concrete and connectivity. Today the mukhalinga's faces are badly unrecognizable with just their ears and a naga visible. Since it remains wrapped with a cloth and covered with flowers, I have made an attempt here to draw its features to aid your comprehension:



Panjirthi was a cremation site for the villages around with each of its banks allotted to a set of villages just like different ghats are allotted to people of different regions in Kashi and Haridwar. My grandparents and other deceased family members were cremated at Panjirthi. Moreover once a year, people from vicinity and far off would gather on the 14th of Chaitra for a big mela and the massive, otherwise desolate floodplain of Panjirthi would turn into a fairground with lots of hustle and bustle.

Shaivism has turned into an extremely generalized sect in society these days and locals have forgotten why the mela happens on the 14th of Chaitra which is the birthday of Lakulisa or Nakulisa, the 28th incarnation of Shiva. They just know "chodah-chaitr" as an auspicious day and are unaware of the heritage and culture it holds. They have actually forgotten Lakulisa who was a historical person like Buddha Sakyamuni and Mahavira. Instead Shivratri and Nagpanchami are more popular and remembered more in their narrative context.

The first chapter of the Sri-Lakutapane(ni)sa mahatmya talks about the birth of Siva in Sri-Vayupurana (12).

It's a 7th century text, incidentally of the same time as the arrival of the King in Panjirthi.

D.R. Bhandarkar, an early 20th century Indian archaeologist and epigraphist who came across a rare copy of the "Sri-Lakutapane(ni)sa mahatmya" during his work in Rajputana translated it in a paper contributed to the Archeological Survey of India Annual Report 1906-1907 (12).

"There was a sage named Atri, and in his lineage was born Visvarupa. His wife was Sudarsana. In order to favor Virabhadragana, Shiva incarnated himself in Ulkapura. He was conceived in her womb in the month of Bhadrapad. In course of time as the month of Chaitra arrived, she gave birth to a child after midnight on the 14th of the bright half, and the mother saw, in the lying-in chamber, as soon as born, that her child was of tawny eyes and tawny hair, and like heated gold in complexion."

Bhandarkar's father, R.G. Bhandarkar who was a great Indian orientalist proved through his research that Lakulisa who was believed to be an incarnation of Siva, eventually became the principal deity of Pasupata sect (13)--the generic name Pasupata finds its mention in the Mahabharata as well. This might also be the context to why locals believe the Panjirthi mukhalinga and the Bilkeshwar temple to be established by the Pandavas. Every historic past had an historic past and much of orally transmitted history is preserved in codified narratives like this.

Father Bhandarkar calculated the rise of the Pasupata school to the second century A.D. while his son based on the Mathura pillar inscription from during the reign of Chandragupta II, calculated it to be first century A.D. (13)

Lakulisa had four disciplines: Garga, Kusika, Mita and Kaurusya. These four were the originators of four sub-divisions in Lakula Saivism i.e. Kalamukha, Pasupata, Kapalika and Kaula. While the first two followed the Daksina path or the right path, the latter two followed the Vamacara or the left path.

It's important to understand how the Daksina path of Kalamukha and Pasupata get inscribed through the iconography of the Panchmukhalinga at Panjthirthis or what the iconography of the mukhalinga means in Lakulisa Sivaism!

Dr. (Mrs.) Vasundhara Filliozat talks about Pampamahatmya or the story of Hampi or Pampa, the holy pilgrim center in Karnataka in her book (14) "Kalamukha and Pasupata Temples in Dharwar." The whole text of Pampamahatmya is divided into three divisions (14): Purva, Madhya and Uttarabhaga. A rare manuscript of it is present in the Oriental Institute, Mysore and in the 14th chapter of the Uttarabhaga, the etymology and the significance of the word, Kalamukha is described.

According to it, Kalamukhas are those who worship the objects where "Kalas" are installed and these Kalas are: "Nivrtti, Pratistha, Vidya, Santi and Santyatita." The five mukhas of the Shiva are linked with these five Kalas and the worshipers of the Shiva whose five faces are connected with the five kalas are called Kalamukhas(14). Within the Kalamukhas there are four sub-sects with varied ritualistic traditions but irrespective of that they are all bound to know the tattvas or the realities of the five kalas of shiva.

Kalas are basically the attainment levels or Shaktis in Sivasiddhi. Those who attain Nivrtti or rise above the objects of senses or earth element, conquer the transformations in the earthly domain--they get established in the Pratistha kala and here they attain proficiency over the water element and are called Pratisthitas. They then become eligible to move into the next kala i.e. Vidhya and the one in this state has control over the fire element and is called a knower. Once proficiency in this kala is attained, the Kalamukha becomes illegible to move to the next kala--Santi. According to Filliozat's translations, he becomes free of desire and can calm down evil by simply looking at it and can also enter into other's bodies. He's called Santa and has full control over the element air or Prana and can also direct the movement of Nagas.

5 Kalas	Element	Shakti or Shivasiddhi
1-Nivrtti	Earth	Kriyashakti
3-Vidhya	Fire	Jnanasakti
4-Santi	Air	Adisakti
5-Santyatita	Ether	Parasakti
2-Pratisthitas	Water	Ichhasakti

I have always wondered why the Panchmukhalinga at Panjthirthis has only one Naga that appears to come forth from behind one of the five faces. It could be actually a representative of the Santi kala where the ascetic attains control of the Nagas.

Once the Sanat kala is attained, the Kalamukha moves into Santyatita, the kala of liberation from all bondages. He becomes one with Shiva.

The five kalas can also be inferred by synonymosity with five siddhis or shaktis--meaning in Santyatita kala the shivasadak gets Parasakti; in Santi kala he gets Adisakti; in Vidhyakala, he gets Jnanasakti; in Pratistha kala he gets Ichhasakti; and he gets Kriyasakti in Nivrttikala.

The Pampamahatmya also names the five faces of Shiva, "Isna, Vamadeva, Sadojata, Aghora and Tatpurusa" complementing the five shaktis or kalas respectively.

"To Lakulisaivas this lingas is at the origin of the construction of all the three worlds," said the Filliozats in their book Kalmukha Temples of Karnataka, Art and cultural legacy.

"According to Mahatmya the Kalamukha sadhaka should be the knower of the five kalas of Siva. He who knows these five tattvas, is a Desika or Diksita."

Any traditional consecration of an ancient pachmukhalinga that subscribes to the five kalas can't be achieved by a novice or low attainment level ascetic obviously. Though today we don't know who would have consecrated it and who built it, it would have been surely done by a Lukulisa-pashupata of a high Shivite Yogic attainment. Same is likely the case with other such ancient sites.

Astronomer Varahamihira states in Brhatsamhita that to consecrate a Brahma's image one needs to be well versed in Vedas--just as only Bhagavatas can install images of Vishnu and Pasupatas can consecrate images of Shiva. (15)

It's interesting to note that Panchmukhilanga is found in the Billkeshwar temple as well. Kak too mentions it--noting the pic in his book I can see that it's still in almost the same condition inside the temple. It appears extremely old and its iconography is different from the one at Panjthirthis. I have seen another Panchmukhalinga at the Thakur Dwarka in Bhaddu seated on a lotus carved base. It however appears to be from more recent periods compared to those at Bilkeshwar and Panjthirthis and its iconography is further different from the other two. Thakur Dwarka is the temple of the traditional priests of the royal family of Bhaddu which was incidentally also the birth household of maharaja Gulab Singh's mother, Rani Paddual.

Importance of Panjthirthis As A Pilgrimage:

Panjthirthis, as the name suggests is a sacred place or place of pilgrimage with the presence of five water bodies and there are many of them from historicity in India. The Chinese pilgrim traveller, Hiuan Tsang mentions Panjthirthis as a site of five sacred ponds in ancient Gandhara, surrounded by Brahmanical temples--later identified by the British in north-east of the ancient city of Purushapura or today's Peshwar--between the Grand Trunk Road

and the railways in British time (16). Incidentally there's a Panjthirtha in Puri--it's also the site of a sacred five ponds. So it's not difficult to comprehend why ancients would have called the confluence of five rivers with a Shiva temple in Shivaliks as Panjthirthi.



Until 1950-60 there were no stairs to climb to the temple and the rock was steep and difficult to climb.

According to Collins, Panchavata Tirtha finds its mention in Vamana Purana under a passage on places of pilgrimage.

"There is the Pancavata Tirtha there, famed throughout the three worlds, where Mahadeva himself is established in the form of Yoga-murti.

Bathing and worshipping the God of gods, Mahesvara there, one attains the rank of Ganesa and enjoys the company of the gods."

Charles Dillard Collins (2) writes that the Vamana Purana, for the first time mentions the name "Nakulisa" not as a Siva incarnation but as a Gana. What's very striking here is how closer this description in Vamana Purana as started by Collins comes to the ancient identity of Panjthirthi.

"To the West of Sthanu (a tirtha to Siva) is the Gana, Nakulisa situated. Worshipping him with care, one is freed from sins."

Collins wrote that these two passages in Vamana Purana might be a reference to Pasupata sect goals.



Panjthirthi on the rock at the confluence of five rivers. This picture was taken from the side of Bhini river.

Interestingly, the sacred book of the Lakulina sect, the work of Lakulisa is called Panchartha or Panchadhyayi or Pancarthavidya according to Vayavijya Samhita (14). Madhava termed it "Pancarhta Bhasya Dipika" in the section on Nakulisa Pasupata. This simply implies that the "pancha" or the numeral five was sacred and fundamental to the Lakulisa-Pashupatis. The site of Panjthirthi at the rare and natural confluence of five rivers, which even today remains the remotest of the remote sites would have presented an ideal spot matching the narrative of the Lakulisa-Pasupata.

Moreover for solitude seeking Lakulina ascetics who need ashes from pyres for ritualistic engagements, Panjthirthi would have again been a providing site. The lush jungles around, the connectivity through Agli dhar, the villagers of believers around and the river route to Kailash would have invited many ascetics to this site. During each visit to the Panjthirthi temple in the last few years, I have come across different ascetics residing at the temple which currently has a residential room for their stay.

Because of the remoteness of the site and the increasing terrorist attacks in this region in 2024, the geographical connectivity of this corridor has become a national security concern and it's no longer easy to even trust ascetics residing in such places. However in 2023 when I visited this place, I found two ascetics in ocre with thick matted hair from Chattisgarh camping at the temple residence in Panjthirthi and they told me that the clan of ascetics considers Panjthirthi to be an "agyatvas" or a place where no one can find you.



The floodplain of Panjthirthi from different angles.

The historicity and the civilizational connectivity of Panjthirthi being a Lakulisa place is further attested by what Vasundhara and Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat said in their book "Kalamukha Temples of Karnataka" (1).

"What is known as Kasmira Saivism in general is told by a few authors to have come to Karnataka in the garb of Lakulisaiva. But the movement from which it originated began somewhere in the centre of India in a place called Kayavarohana." (1)

"The founder of this Saivism, as per legends, was Lakulisa, who was none other than Siva himself."

Presence of Bhadramukhas or Siva Mahadeva

What would bhadramukhas or the three faced icon of Siva Mahadeva indicate about Lakulisa-Pasupata in these Jammu shivalik ranges.

Before I share my thoughts on it, I'll share where all I found Bhadramukhas on Route two. Here's a list:

1. Siva Mahadeva on all the four faces of the Sikhara (tower) of Trilochannath.
2. Siva Mahadeva on all the four faces of the Sikhara of Dandyadi temple.
3. Siva Mahadeva on a remnant wooden plank of the four century old Vasak nag temple in Panyalag.
4. Siva Mahadeva on the four Sikharas of Bilkeshwar temple.



The first three appear of the same iconography—enclosed within a sphere. All three cases have the similar head ornamentation.

These three stand out in their iconographic and narrative connection with what's present in Jageshwar dham temple complex in Almora, Uttarakhand in Central Himalayas.

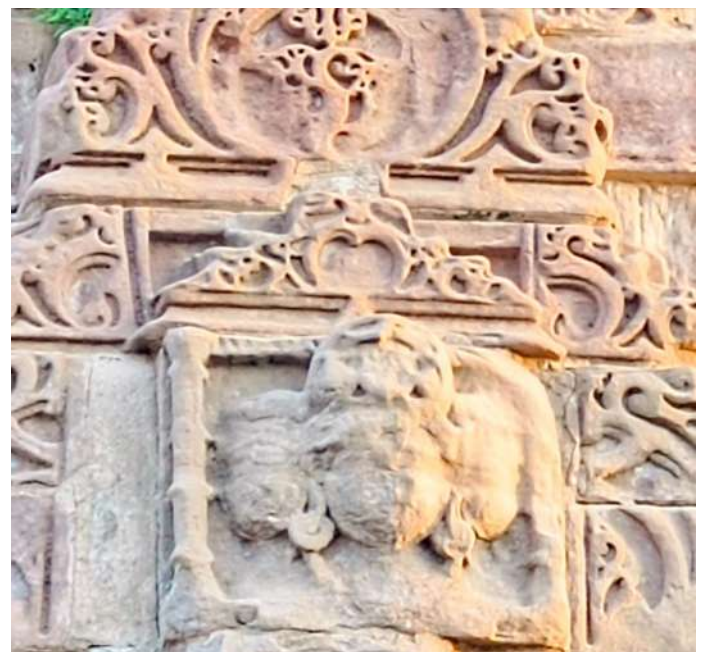
The Maha Mrityunjaya temple in Jageshwar bears the same Siva Mahadeva on the east face of its Sikhara or tower. Under it there's a figure of Siva as Lakulisa. The Siva Mahadeva iconography is strikingly similar to the three faces within a sphere seen in Trilochannath and the two temples in Bani.

The Jageshwar temples were built and renovated by the Katyuri dynasty and was a center of Lakulisa-Pasupata. Situated between the two rivers Nandini and Surabhi--they were a major pilgrimage destination before the construction of roads, just like Bilkeshwar would have been at the confluence of Naj and Bhini.

Since the folklore talks about Raja Thanpal arriving in Panjthirthi 700 years ago from Almora—there's likely a connection between the Lakulisa-Pasupata heritage of this region in Jammu Shivaliks with the Lakulisa-Pasupata heritage of central Himalayas in Uttarakhand.

The fourth Siva Mahadeva of our interest of study is present on the four Sikharas of Bilkeshwar temple. This is what Kak (5) says about it:

"The spire is divided into ten panels by ribbed courses, the lowermost panel being ornamented with floral scrolls. The ornamentation on the outermost offset is carried up to the finial. On each side are two stone slabs bearing three-headed busts; one is just below the apex of the roof of the outermost offset and the other below the top of the spire. The image in the niche on the external face of the southern wall of the porch is that of Siva."



Shiva Mahadeva with visibly pierced ears as followed in Kanphatiya traditions on the shikhar of the Bilkeshwar temple.

Since the Billkeshwar temple hasn't yet been studied and my entire endeavour has been to fathom its identity and through it fathom the identity of my ancestral region--I would first explain the literary evidence about the connection between Jageshwar group of temples and the cave temples of Jogeshwari, Elephanta. Through it we'll explain the Siva Mahadeva of Bilkeshwar.

Charles Dillard Collins writes in his book "The Iconography & Ritual of Siva at Elephanta" (2) about the four faces of Siva or the Maheshmurti image of Elephanta indicating his "high Yoga-power" and that there's a character for each face. The east one denotes his rule over the world, the north sports his relation with Uma (his wife), the west face warrants the contentment of all creatures and the south face denotes his power of destruction."

According to him the "bust-type Maheshmurti images of the same configuration as the one in Elephanta and roughly contemporary with it" are found on the Mrtyunjaya temple at Jageshwar.

He mentions similar iconography in Parasiramesvara temple in Bhubaneswar in Odisha and a few other examples but I'm here citing the case of Jageshwar because of the folklore connecting Almora with Jammu Shivaliks and the Lakulisa-Pasupata heritage of the two regions.

Connection of Lakulisa Pasupata with Brahma

There's an extremely narrative description of Lakulisa's spiritual attainment and connection with Brahma that can help us dwell afresh into how four headed busts are connected with Lakulisa-Pasupata and if they are of Brahma. I have found Brahma idols not only in Bilkeshwar temple which even Kak has documented but I have found them in Dandayadi village in Bani as well.



The small idol of Brahma inside the Shiva temple in Dandyadi village in Bani.

Plus the Bhadrarakas or the Shiva-mahadeva icons on the Sikharas of the temples I mention on route one and route two including the Trilochannath and Billkeshwar temples all have a trinity perspective of Maheshmurti and I have found its connection with Brahma in Sri-Lakutapane(m)sa mahatmya.

According to D.R. Bhandarkar's paper published in the Archeological Survey of India, Annual Report 1906-07, a rare manuscript of the Sri-Lakutapane(m)sa mahatmya (12) that he found during his travels in modern Karvan, the village identified with Kayavarohana, the birthplace of Lakulisa in today's Gujarat--there's a mention of Lakulisa's conversation with god Vriddhadeva from whom he sought refuge and was directed to Brahmesvara. This is how Bhandarkar translates the passage of our interest from Sri-Lakutapane(m)sa mahatmya.

"Having heard the words of the god Vriddha, Lakulisa went to Brahmesvara and there merged himself into him. There divine Mahesvara remained in bodily form, and as he descended to the earth in his very body the place was called Kayarohana. And so he merged into the linga called Brahma, with asidanda in his left, and bijapuraka or citron in his right hand.

Mahadeva said: 'Thus in Karohana I incarnated myself for sanctifying Bhrikukshetra. From the mind of Brahma sprang Atri, from Atri Atreya, from the latter Agnisarma, from Agnisarma Somasarma, from the latter Visvarupa, and from Visvarupa I myself assuming a boy's form.'

This description of Lakulisa's enlightenment or final mergence with his cultivated god head might actually be the equivalent of Bhuddha enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and Karvan in Lakulisa-Pashupata could actually be what Bodh gaya is to Bhuddhist for in the tradition of yoga, birth is synonyms with enlightenment and final spiritual attainment.

Thus the presence of Brahma idols or Siva-Mahadeva or four-head busts or Maheshmurti could all imply the attainment of Lakulisa or his mergence with Brahma or him becoming Shiva himself. This could thus be the symbolism of Yogic attainment and Yogic tradition under Lakulisa-Pasupata.

DR Bhandarkar writes in his paper (12), "The name Kayavarohana literally means "(the place of) the descent in bodily form", and we are distinctly told in the Mahatmya, as we have seen, that the place was so called because Siva descended there in bodily form. The Vayupurana, however, gives the name Kayarohana, which, as pointed out by Dr. Fleet, has not the same sense.'It on the contrary, means (the place of) the ascent in bodily form.' This name is intelligible only on the supposition that it refers to the merging of Lakulisa into the linga Brahmesvara, also referred to in the mahatmya."

One finds this narrative iconography of Lakulisa and Brahmesvara at many temples in India in varied depictions.

Needless to say, the entire route through this Sivaism corridor was perpetually for the purpose of yogic sadhana under Sivaism--the ascetics continued them in traditions of solitude and penance subscribed under the system in which they were initiated while the public moving through this corridor established it through religion, architecture and pilgrimage narratives.

Alas! How the Bilkeshwar temple got destroyed to the state that its beautiful sculptures got fragmented is unknown. Historians haven't discussed this region in Gaznavi's routes for invasion into India. So I'm not sure if Gaznavide invasions had any contribution. Gurnal is even today very prone to floods and I have witnessed it myself, however Bilkeshwar temple is on the Billawar hill at a much higher elevation from the Naj river and it is at least 400 meters from the edge of the hill that today bears a gate and a remnant of a fort from the river side. Other natural calamities like earthquakes likely have contributed; inter-sect fights between pre and post Gorakhnath Sivaite cults could be a cause too whose few stories too exist in the region.

"Two + Two faces" under the "Four-faced Bust" in Bilkeshwar Temple



Let's again revisit Kak's description of the four faced bust found (5) in Bilkeshwar temple in what's today Billawar.

"This is surmounted by a four-headed bust (really there are four busts of four heads). Each head wears a necklace. In the corners in front and back, just where the nipples of the breast ought to be, are carved heads reclining sideways. The ear ornament is a circular jeweled disc.

The Heads are adorned with three crescented or peaked crowns. Over the head is a further eight--sided projection, which probably served as the tenon of a finial. It seems probable that this stone was the crowning ornament of the apex of a spire (perhaps of the temple itself). If the figure is that of Brahma, the four minor heads may represent the embodied Vedas."

Kak had hypothesized that the two smaller faces which he terms as "carved heads reclining sideways," under the bust on each side--meaning a total of four faces could denote the four Vedas if the bust is of Brahma.

However, keeping in mind the perspective of Bilkeshwar temple being an ancient seat of Lakulisa-Pasupata, I consider the four faces to represent the four disciples of Lakulisa--Kalamukha, Pasupata, Kapalika and Kaula.

If the bust is only of Lakulisa's one out of the four disciples--Kalamukha--the four faces could represent the four sub-sects of Kalamukhas.

Kailash Kund and Region's Culture of Naga Worship



Kailash kund lake in Bhaderwah

While Bilkeshwar temple is the centerpiece of this entire Shivite corridor, the Kailash Kund is the backbone of this pilgrimage's endeavor and identity.

For locals, it's not like our intellectual or conceptual comprehension at research Institutes where we have access to literature and compare different traditions, rituals, and iconographic elements to derive meaning--locals have an inherent way of comprehending their geography as sacred and their narratives are subjective, internalized and likely codified forms of knowledge narratives.

I remember my first visit to Panjtirthi. My accomplice, a permanent resident of the place, looked at the panoramic view of the hills and the mountains in the front and described an entire geography based on which mountain hosts which shrine and devta.



The panoramic view from Kishanpur, a village adjacent to Panjithirthi.

Just imagine, an ascetic reaching Panjtirthi after a long, tiring journey through the Agli dhar. When he reaches the panch Mukhalinga and looks up, he just doesn't see mountains and forests but he sees his destinations on the pilgrimage. His heart gets filled with renewed aspiration and vigor for the journey ahead because, in each of those mountains, there are gods that he venerates and whose vision was the sole purpose of his journey.

The Brahmapurana mentions four kinds of "Thirthas" or types of pilgrimage: Daiva Tirtha, Asur Tirtha, Rishi Tirtha, and Manav Tirthas. While "Manav Thirthas" are established by humans, "Rishi thirthas" are established by those with high attainment status in their spiritual lineage, "Asur thirthas" are those identified with the victory of gods over demons, and "Daiva Tirthas" are those where the Gods themselves reside. Keeping these definitions in mind, the spiritual and religious heritage of this corridor highlights an extremely rich meaning.

While the Panchmukhalinga at Panjithirthi comes under Rishi Thirtha, The Billkeshwar temple and Trilochannath likely were Manav Thirthas and the Kailash Kund in Bhaderwah continue to be a Daiva Tirtha because it's the abode of Vasuki Nag or Basak Nag as the locals call it. Likely the presence of a Daiva thirtha inspired all other thirthas around it.

If Basak Nag is the king of all Nagas, it's quite logical to find settlements on traditional pilgrimage routes to Kailash Kund where he resides, to be the home of his nag-ganas or celestial beings of his Nag world of ranks lower to him. And that appears to be the case in the region with many nagas but no one with the glory or inspiration of Basak nag—nonetheless all nag ganas have their small and big homes around them.

This belief visibly manifests itself as nagas or the water-borne serpent spirits inhabiting lakes and springs in this entire corridor of my study. Nagas are powerful celestial beings within the three realms or triloka or three dimensions who have a monopoly over certain knowledge codes and traditions. There are different kinds of them with power and control over different dimensions of existence and thus the secrets of those domains. One finds these descriptions of nagas amply in the south Indian culture too but the socio-cultural practices differ from what's visible in the region of my study. There could be certain similarities too but I'm yet to discover or study them.

Let's get back to how Kalamukhas worship the five kalas whose proficiency gives the Shivite ascetic different siddhis. Filliozat describes (14) how the one in "Santi kala" gains full control over the element air and attains control over nagas. If this was the pilgrimage corridor of Lakulisa-pasupata wouldn't it have invited Kalamukhas who would have different kinds of interactions with nagas and comprehension of the naga's existence along the path of the pilgrimage--if not control?

Very likely those highly proficient in ancient times would have control too even if it was the rarest of rare. The unique hydrogeology of the Himalayas in this region criss-crossed by underground water channels and surface reservoirs and aquifers has thus helped to evolve a unique culture of naga belief and worship.

While Kashmir is well known for its lakes and springs inhabited by Nagas--this part of the world in the North of Ravi in Basoli, Billawar, Bhaderwah, and Kishtwar also boasts of the same culture. Kashmir's nagas are more popular in lore probably because of Kashmir's popularity and place in the history of human civilization. Kalhan's Rajtargini lucidly talks about the Kashmiri people's belief in them.

Moreover, Kashmir valley has been a continuously and more thickly inhabited region since antiquity while it's very obvious that these mountain regions in Jammu didn't enjoy the same socio-political theatrics in history. So while Kashmir valley became a region where knowledge societies and institutions under different faiths continued to gain traction, this place remained known more to ascetics or others who settled there while on a pilgrimage or those who sought protection and shelter after wars and persecution of Islamic invaders. It remained more in Agvatwas! And that's the nature of the Kalamukhas.

Fast forward, a lack of popularity or lack of modern development in these picturesque regions in a way has helped preserve not only the Jammu mountainous region's ecosystem better but has also preserved some of the Naga practices in their remote forms which otherwise wouldn't have existed and are no longer practiced in the Kashmiri society.

Auriel Stein who translated Rajtarangini has talked about naga-inhabited springs and lakes in Kashmir. He wrote (17) in a footnote in his translation:

"From early times considerable importance must have been attached to their worship, as is proved by the long account given of them in Nilmata, by the numerous temples erected near the more famous springs, and the popularity and undoubtedly ancient origin of the pilgrimages directed to the latter. . . . The popular conception of the Nagas, as now current, represents them under the form of snakes, living in the water of the springs or lakes protected by them."

My travel through Basoli and Bani regions in September 2024 particularly helped me witness how the people's belief in Nagas is not just limited to their faith but has an operational existence in their immediate world and this manifests as a unique comprehension of their geography.

For example, when I stayed at Panyalag village in Bani and trekked to Maghani, a hill of thick Himalayan cedar (deodar) caught my attention because all its trees appeared to perfectly align towards the hill's summit with a perfect sense of geometry and rhyme. Later I was told that the hill is the abode of "Khaji nag" and up amidst its forests there's a pond.



The Khaji nag hill is to the left and the Panlayag village is on the right.

My aunt (father's younger brother's wife) who grew up in Panyalag and whose brothers are currently the custodians of centuries-old Basak Nag temple in Panyalag told me that once ascetic camping at the pond of Khaji Nag wanted to check its depth and he threw a stick into the pond which finally emerged at a spring in another village.

Panyalag's temple was built by Basoli's ruler, Bhoopat Pal (1573 to 1642) who is described as an extremely well-built warrior in folklore (4). Bhoopatpal once was going for a war to Bhaaderwah and on his way while trying to cross Kailash Kund he was surrounded by Nagas from all sides, according to the folklore. He threw the gold earring he was wearing to the Nagas and asked for forgiveness. It is said that only after he did that he was let go. But what becomes very intriguing here is that one of the gold earrings

he threw in the lake emerged from a spring in Bani where he stopped to drink water during his return.

How true or false such tales are is difficult to fathom but what's interesting is how people in these regions comprehend their sacred naga-nomenclature geography to be linked through far-off places--particularly the connection of sacred lakes and ponds with sacred freshwater springs. This simply means that they were traveling, exploring, identifying, and associating with these distantly located places.

This also implies that people understood in historicity without being equipped with modern tech tools that there's an underground world of water and it's connected with overground reservoirs. Moreover, they understood that the kinetics of water between these two points is ensured by Nagas.

Rituals and Practices of Naga Worship



*People in the hills consider "Ant hills" to be the residences of Nagas and venerate and worship them.
An anthill under worship in Rampur Rasool, Billawar.*

Since childhood I have been a witness to a very pertinent naga culture in my region—my paternal community's mundane ceremonies happen in Mansar and our community deity is Vasuki nag whose temple at the Mansar lake in Surinsar-Mansar biosphere is our family's gathering place for such rituals.

Even in our ancestral home in Bhaddu, we have a place for the nag devta down the hillside where my extended family continues to unfurl a flag and light a lamp on important occasions. Plus there's a bigger shrine devoted to a Nag devta in Bhaddu where we were sent to offer the first harvest every season in childhood. My father tells me about a festival that happened in this temple officiated by a Chela or oracle who these days lives in Delhi but visits the village to organize the annual festival. Incidentally, in all Naga shrines in the region, you'll see "sangal." The sangal in its construction is a cluster of iron chains with a unique design. They are joined to an iron rod which gives a good grip. The Chela picks them up while in trance or as locals say while the devta enters him.

In Bhaddu's Nag devta shrine there's an emblem of Nagas (the actual devta in this shrine) and loads of "sangals" that represent him and which the chela picks up when the Naga devta enters his body on special occasions. Any normal human strength wouldn't be capable of carrying such a heavy load with both hands swinging them as if they were mere plastic pop-ups!



Sangals and Tridents.

Thus the premise is that the devta or a naga is enshrined in a temple not as an idol but as Sangal.

What this means is that if you go to such a local shrine in regions of Bhaddu, Billawar, Basoli, or Baderwah, you'll not see an idol but these totems—people treat them like gods and address them by the name of the gods consecrated in them. These traditions are documented exactly the way I'm describing by J. PH Vogel in his early 20th-century book (18) "Indian Serpent Lore or The Nagas in Hindu Legend and Art." Vogel appears very prejudiced in some of his analysis but his documentation of the Naga traditions and the Naga folklore of the western Himalayas is precise and important work. He also talks about Sangals but doesn't give any analysis.

Vogel describes these traditions to be present in Baderwah, Shimla, Chamba, Kulu, and in other regions of the Punjab hills which during his travels included the regions that I'm today studying between the Ravi and Ujh. He also describes how goat or sheep sacrifices were common in some of these temples which continues to this day.

While traveling to this region in the past few years I came across the two-century-old ancestral home of General Hoshiyara Singh, a Dogra warrior who led the "Battle of Yasin" during Maharaja Ranbir Singh's time in 1863. General Hoshiyara's home in Rampur-

Rasool village about 10 miles from Billawar maintains the temple from his days (19). In his family temple, I saw the heaviest Sangals I have ever seen in this region. What this means is that the Dogra warrior who was an ardent Devi devotee was capable of carrying that heavy load. Raja Sourav Singh Sarmal identifies Hoshiyara Singh as a Chela or an oracle himself. The temple also maintains an "Akhand Jyoti" started by his wife in his name and his descendants continue to own his weapons that are worshipped once a year as per the original "astra puja" tradition.



Gen. Hoshiyara Singh's ancestral home in Rampur Rasool village in Billawar.

However more than the tradition of Dogra warriors, General Hoshiyara Singh's story talks about an important Shiva-Shakti tradition and I got to know about it through Guru Nidar Singh Nihang, the only existing master and ninth Gurdev ("grandmaster") of a classical school of learning called the Baba Darbara Singh Akhara™ established in 1661. The Akhara itself is the last remnant of an ancient tradition (20).

I met Nidar Singh ji after listening to his lecture at the Indian International Centre in New Delhi and shared with him Hoshiyara Singh's story. It was then that I came to know that Nidar Singh Nihang and Hoshiyara Singh denote two different warrior traditions of Shashtra Vidya. While Nidar Singh comes under the Pashupati tradition denoted by the trident on his Pagri or turban, Hoshiyara Singh belongs to the Bhairon tradition of warriors. These were two different schools of martial arts.

Hoshiyara's descendants told me that he carried the smaller version of a "sangal" in silver in his Pagri and also carried eleven shaligrams in his pocket. Nidar Singh told me all Nihangs also carry shaligrams in their pocket. He even showed me the ones he was carrying.

Nidar Singh mentions on his website that Pashupatis were the first masters of Sanatan Shastra Vidya. He quotes Thomas McEvilley, the author of "The Shape of Ancient Thought" that Pashupati warriors carried clubs in imitation of Lukulisa (20).

The Kapalikas, another sect within Lakulisa-Pashupata is also denoted as a warrior sect by Nidar Singh. He mentions Guru Gobind Singh's description of a mythological battle:

"Danced the Kapalik, beating a rhythmic beat raising
a fearful clamour."

(Sarbloh Guru Granth Sahib, 1:2.87)

George Weston Briggs mentioned in his book "Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis" (21) that once initiated, the Gorakhnathi could choose to become a "militant yogi, vowed to celibacy. In this case, he would be known as Naga, Nihang, or Kanphata. On the other hand, quite contrary to supposed regulations, he may become a householder or grhasta."

Different Siva Akhadas of history have thus come with many centuries of evolved traditions of warriors, martial arts, and the art of weaponry some of which particularly became public when this corridor faced a continuous onslaught of Islamic invaders from the West Asia of the historic past.

There's also the presence of oracles within this corridor. They are not the same as black magicians and have somewhat priestly duties (18). They are called Chelas. I have met Chelas or oracles in the Bani region—Chelas come across from many generations in family lineages for both Naga and Devi temples in the region. I met Om Prakash the Chela of the Basak Nag temple in Duggan village and Joginder Kumar the Chela of a Devi temple in Maghani village in September 2024. Prakash was preparing for a three-day, tough trek from Duggan to Kailash Kund in Bhaderwah and told me that there's a unique Jantri or Panchang that determines the date of the pilgrimage that happens at different regularities and dates for different temples.

Some do it annually while others like the one in Duggan do it once in three years. I asked Prakash if he had seen Basak Nag and he said he had a vision of the king of the Nagas thrice in his lifetime—once while on his way to Bhaderwah and twice at the sacred lake.

The Chela, Joginder Kumar traced his family's presence in Maghani beginning three centuries ago when they were on a pilgrimage to Kailash kund in Bhaderwah from a village of Basoli and were led by a divine premonition to the village of their current settlement. He talked about how the Devi idol venerated in his temple had emerged from a rock that fell when his forefathers arrived there. Besides the Devi, there were old tridents and Sangal which Kumar said belonged to the Sadhu or the ascetic who resided at the spot before his forefathers landed there 300 years ago.

These two Chelas prove the Kailash Kund centrality of this entire corridor—there are umpteen such stories of families in this region with a history of arrival in this region for pilgrimage before finally settling there with an unshakable faith in Basak Nag. On such heights and remote regions, it was only this faith that brought people to these altitudes and inspired them to live there while there were still no roads and life was tough.



A view of the Bani region, thick with forests, valleys, and meadows taken in September 2024.

Shivlings on Lotus Bases

Since Collins has identified the ascetic Siva (2) on the lotus seat at the Elephanta panel to be of Lakulisa--it might give us a perspective about the special Shivlings with lotus bases I sighted at Gurnal and Bhaddu. They could denote Lakulisa and his yogic tradition.



Lotus shivling base lying outside the temple at the Gurnal site along with other ruins. The stone on the top is not shivling by just a stone randomly put by someone.

Gorakhnathis /Kanphatiyas and Other Siva Cults in the Region

The Billkeshwar temple and a few sites around it also appear to have some connection with the Gorakhnathis\ Kanphatiyas. After much literature review, I infer the Nath Yogi traditions to have come to the region much later after Lakulisa-Pashypata just like the renunciants of the Giri sect were present in the region much later during my grandparents and parents' time.

Giris is one of the ten Shiva sect groups or the Akhadas classified by Adi Shankaracharya (21) and we'll discuss their presence in the wider Jammu region, particularly in the Kathua district, and their visible influence over my community.

The most significant indication of the Nath Yogi connection of Vallapur lies in the nomenclature of the traditional priests of the Billkeshwar temple who are with the surname "Nath Yogis" and whose gotra is Kashyapa. In history, Brahmins of Kashyapa gotra are found even in other parts of India and were identified as Shiva devotees—for example, the young Brahmin, Vicharasarman in Chola country who is remembered for his devotion to Shiva. (22)

In the 1920s, George Weston Briggs, an American clergyman, and educator who had earlier served in the British army and was a member of the American Oriental Society and the New York-based American Anthropological Association, exhaustively traveled around India to document the history, traditions, practices and geographical sites of Gorakhnathis or Kanphatiya yogis or the Shaivite yogis most visibly recognizable by their slit ears and big earrings--exactly of the same style as clearly visible on the four Siva Mahadeva busts on the shikaras of the Billkeshwar temple.

Briggs mentioned in his book that once initiated, the follower of the path could choose to become a "militant yogi, vowed to celibacy (22). In this case, he would be known as Naga, Nihang, or Kanphata. On the other hand, quite contrary to supposed regulations, he may become a householder or grhastha."

The traditional priests of the Billkeshwar temple thus should be Gorakhnathis who would have entered into grahastha sometime in their history.

"In the Himalayas, many householders are found, and in some instances the pujari rights at their temples are kept in the family, being handed down from father to son," wrote Briggs.

A college-going boy from the priest family of Billkeshwar temple had told me once that they are "independent nath yogis" with no connection with other Akhadas elsewhere. The locals also believe in the presence of an idol of Gorakhnath in the shrine--however, this isn't mentioned by Kak nor does the ASI attest it. So it could be someone else who has been worshipped as Gorakhnath or an idol might have been introduced later.

This isn't however sufficient to refute the Gorakhnath/Kanphatiya connection of Billawar because other aspects in literature indicate a stronger Nath Yogi heritage of the region--and the most significant among these proofs is the presence of a temple of Balasundri--its location, lore and original architectural heritage. I have had a pilgrimage to Balasundri a few times since childhood. I witnessed it for the first time over three decades ago.

Briggs lucidly described the initiation rituals of the Kanphatiya yogis (21) and mentioned that the initiation took place at a monastery, at a place of pilgrimage, or the temple of Bhairam. The initiation that involves multiple steps in piercing the initiator's ears is completed with the "worship of nine Nathas, the eighty-four Siddhas and Balasundri."

We grew up in old Jammu city listening to everyone's travelogs to Vaishnodevi. But Balasundri was a very unique and unknown name in those days of the 1990s. It's still more known to people in Kathua than those in the Jammu district or those outside Jammu and Kashmir. When I first heard about it I was told that its trek uphill is similar but shorter than the Vaishnoodevi trek and that unlike Vaishnodevi which resides in a cave, Balasundri is enshrined in a temple. This means Balasundri is a manav thirtha established under a tradition, with the purpose of yogic rituals.

My first visit to Balasundri as a child below eight years of age is still very fresh in my conscience because of what I experienced there. We walked for about four hours starting on a path into the forest beside a bridge on the Bhini River, ahead of the Phinter town junction. There were no police and security posts those days and when we reached the base of the temple, the last milestone was a steep layer of steps to the temple premises.

I don't know who guided me to look under the stairs but when I did so, I saw a layer of crude steps carved into the rock. Until the time of my grandfather's youth, the final 50 meters to the temple were the toughest--pilgrims held on to two ropes and climbed the steep rock with the agility of today's professional climbers. Once on the top, a wider premise greets the pilgrim. From there another layer of steps led to the small temple upstairs from where one can have a 360 degrees bird's eye view of the world below.

Another short layer of steps led to a pond below which startled me the most because its two chambers visibly appeared cut into the rock bed. There was a small cave on the rock beside the pond into which we climbed as kids. At that time it was empty and my cousin and I went inside it. It was sufficient to house two skinny children and I remember I had my first experience of meditation inside it.

People in Bhaddu often talked about having visions of Balasundri and I have heard of such a vision from a renowned historian as well who was visiting Bhaddu for research.

However, the second time I visited the Balasundari shrine, the cave looked so small that I wondered how I could have even gone inside. It had already been smeared with orange sindoor or cosmetic powder used in rituals and a trident had been placed inside it. Those state of affairs saddened me. By this time I was in high school and I remember being told that the temple resembles ancient temples in Orissa which I now understand as temples built in Nagara style.

But synthetic paints have made things very unrecognizable and disconnected from their original, ancient form.

Balasundri temple located on a pinnacle of the Agli dhar had an alternate foot route from the other side from Kathua as well. My eldest uncle told me that Greatgrandfather's father, Durodhayan took this route to enter Punjab while on his way to Haridwar. I particularly also remember this route because, during my early visits when I was trek-weary, I was told by someone that it was a shorter route.

It was a delight to have a bird's-eye view of the world from the top in those days of pre-google satellite maps. I was particularly delighted to locate my village Bhaddu from there and also sighted Billawar and the panoramic view of the higher Shivalik ranges around what is Himachal Pradesh.

This alternate route from Kathua meant a direct and shorter route from Lakhanpur and Pathankot and thus from every immediate place across the border.

Briggs provides a detailed description of Gorakhnathis in what's today's Pakistan (21). It's very obvious from the literature review that major pilgrimage towns and routes were always interconnected. Geography makes it amply evident that Kailash Kund in Bhaderwah is one of the few nearest glaciers to Lahore. It's roughly at the same distance from Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh but after the Anglo-Sikh war in 1846, the British took over Lahore and Himachal which means normal rail and road connectivity linked Lahore with Himachal. This wasn't the case with Bhaderwah and that's why until today, the foot routes have been more or less in use in the north of Ravi in the hills.

Brahma Worshipping Gorakhnathis

Briggs describes a sect of Brahma worshipping Gorakhnathis which he said had come from an older sub-sect of Shaivism (21). This history helps me to comprehend the historical linkage between Lakulisa-Pashupata and Gorakhnathis. It could be the historical truth of sites like Billkeshwar.

While describing the division of the Gorakhnath order, Briggs said: "There were formerly eighteen panths of Shiva and twelve of Gorakhnath. These two groups fought each other; and, as a result, twelve of the former and six of the latter were destroyed. The remaining twelve panths of the two sects constitute the order of

the Kanphatas, or Gorakhnathis. Those which were derived from Shiva are: (1) Kantharnath of Bhuj, in Kacch; (2) Pagalnath of Peshawar and Rohtak; (3) Rawal of Afghanistan; (4) Pankh; (5) Ban of marwar; (6) Gopal, or Ram Ke."

Things about Panjtirthi maybe even more historic than what I have analyzed. Briggs mentions that "The Yogi at Puri, with his club" was reminiscent of "the Lakulisa" and he cites and documents a tradition at a place that held the "Pankh", one of the older existent orders of Sivaism from times before Gorakhnath.

He visited this site and said the "Pankh" is related to "Satnath", a twentieth-century existing sub-sect that has its gaddi at Puri.

"This panth is said to follow Brahma."

Briggs also mentions the presence of Garuda in the "establishment" at Puri and this reminded me of the beautiful description of a "Garuda" Kak found in Gurnal.

We should note here that Brigg didn't have a copy of the Sri-Lakutapane(m)sa mahatmya (12) which Bhandarkar had found in the early 1900s in Gujarat and the fundamentals of Lakulisa-Pasupata traditions and the historical connection between Lakulisa-Yoga and Brahma wasn't known to him.

However, Briggs talked about Pashupata sects predating Matsyendranath, the Guru of Gorakhnath. In the chapter on the "Sacred Places" of Gorakhnathis, he wrote: "At Bagmati, about three miles from Patan (Kathmandu), here is a temple of Matsyendranath which is recognized by Gorakhnathis. There's also here a temple of Siva Pasupatinat which appertains to the Kanphatas."

The presence of Gorakhnathis in this region of our study also gets validated by the tradition of "dhuni" still visible in the Siva temple at Bhaddu and in the Trilochanath as well as the Basak nag temple in Panyalag. At the most, it shows the presence of Goraknathi ascetics in these temples and on pilgrimage through these routes.



The dhuni at Trilochanath temple in Basoli.

"Like most Indian ascetics, Kanphatas have several necessary accessories. Among these is the dhuni, or fire, consisting of a smoldering log of wood (or more than one), sometimes in a hollow pit," wrote Briggs.

The Shiva temple in Bhaddu was next to our ancestral home and we have been a witness to shivaite ascetics from various regions of India visiting and residing in the temple. Women in our household would send us in childhood to the temple with milk and food for the ascetics whom we called "Bawas" and I particularly remember two ascetics from childhood--one who wore a long ochre gown and wooden sandals and gave us prasad each time we delivered food and another who wore a dhoti and had planted the most fragrant marigold across the entire slope of temple's hillock. I had enquired with him about where he got the marigold seeds and he said he had picked them from a village while on pilgrimage. These two bawas stand in my mind like painted visuals.

The last time I saw ascetics in Bhaddu temple was about 15 years ago when my uncle took me to their hut where I saw a number of them sitting around the fire/dhuni. Sadly, the Bhaddu temple stopped admitting Bawas after one of them attempted to molest a local girl.

Historically, what's important to understand here is the origin of the word "Bawa" and what it means in Gorakhnath tradition. Briggs mentions an ascetic movement arising from a disciple of Gorakhnath called "Sarangnath or Srangnath." After Gorakhnath's death reached the pinnacle of his influence and his panth or order is sometimes referred to as "Bawaji ka panth" (21). From Sarangnath Panth arose ten branches of Shivites: (1) Girinath, (2) Purinama, (3) Samsia, (4) Militant Nagas, (5) Ajaipal, (6) Gwalibasada, (7) Ismail Jogis, (8) Agamnath, (9) Nimnath and (10) Jalandharnath.

It needs a special mention here that the most well-known ascetic and the one who continues to be worshipped in many households of the wider Kathua region including in the homes of my relatives was known as Pooran Giri.

I met him in early childhood at his ashram at Lakhanpur--the ashram continues to be there but today has turned more into a general temple with no remembrance of history. Pooran Giri came from the Girinath tradition and built and repaired many temples and ashrams in Bhaddu, Khog-mandli, Mashadi, Sukrala mata, Bani, and Lakhanpur--incidentally all on Route Two.

Lakhanpur is on the India-Pakistan international border while the other ashrams are on the other side of the Agli Dhar range. The shorter route to Balasundri from Kathua directly connects Lakhanpur Ashram to the region across Agli Dhar.

Pooran Giri launched a campaign asking people to give up eating onion, garlic, and meat. This campaign wasn't sectarian but had a

historical past. Because it was an important Shivite corridor it attracted Shivite ascetics of all kinds of cults including those who promoted animal sacrifice and those who opposed it. Such influences continue to be visible in temples, particularly in those where animal sacrifice was replaced by the offering of suji (semolina or rava) halwa. Animal sacrifice is still visible in the region.

Some communities are also aware of the practitioners of black magic and practitioners of human sacrifice--those subjects are controversial. They were controversial in history as well and were also a cause of conflict.

Padhe and Gosain

The first home in my paternal village was that of Gosain--it was called "Gosainey da kar" in Dogri (the house of the Gosain). It was also my father's maternal grandmother's home. It was a massive cluster of many smaller homes. Father's maternal and paternal grandparents lived in the same village. This was a source of a lot of excitement for both households.

It's recently that I came to know about the historical significance of Gosain in the western Shivaliks. Nirmohi mentions Gosain as the traditional priests of Shiv temples in the Dogra regions (23).

"Their work was to take care of the Shiv temples, keep it organized and to perform the priestly duties. Whatever was offered at the Shiv temple went to them," said Nirmohi in his book Duggar ki Jatiyan. According to him the priests of Vaishno temples could never claim the offerings of the Shiv temples and it was believed that if anyone other than the Gosain took the offerings, they wouldn't be happy and prosperous.

"In Dogra heartlands, Gosain were appointed the priests wherever kings, landlords or rich people built shiva temples. Thus today wherever you find the ruins of ancient Shiva temples you find the Gosain families settled around," said Nirmohi.

The Dogra historian identifies, Gosain as one follower sect of Shankaracharya. After he attained Samadhi, the ten direct disciples of Shankaracharya established their akharas, and his followers were divided into ten different sects. One of these sects was Gosain, according to Nirmohi.

Gosain were also traders and they purchased goods from the markets in the plains and sold them in the hills. My father remembers his maternal grandfather as an affluent landlord.

While our grandmother whom we affectionately called "Bobo" came from the Gosain family, our grandfather whom we addressed as "Chacha" came from the Padhe family.

Chacha's grandfather was a warrior and his story is preserved in the family because of his journey from Rampur-Rasool in Billawar to Haridwar. This was most likely before the mid-19th century

because the family preserved his British military service medal from 1857. Under some dramatic circumstances, while returning from Haridwar, he visited Patiala where he was appointed in the kingdom's military. He was rewarded for preventing a stampede in the fortified Patiala city where the King of Patiala was giving a public address. His participation in the British offensive against the 1857 mutineers in Delhi is proved by his military service medal and by our family home in Patiala which was sold over five decades ago (24).

My fascination with civilizational routes, Dogra military history, and warrior traditions started because of his story. Strangely, he was called Duryodhan and was very well-built and strong. He went to Haridwar on community duty almost 80 years before Briggs wrote his book on Gorakhnathis.

His two sons were born in Patiala and his eldest son, Sant Ram Dogra went on to study at the prestigious Mohinder Singh College of Patiala of those days, first studying at the School of Languages there and then becoming the first BA in contemporary education in the Dogra kingdom. Sant Ram went on to work in Kashmir's settlement commissions before being appointed as the officer on special duty to codify the customs of Kashmir, a prelude to the creation of the civil judiciary in the kingdom (24).

Two years ago, I happened to find the only existing picture of Sant Ram and when we digitally cleaned the century-old picture, I saw a tilak on his head which marked his Shivite identity. My forefathers were Shivites and despite being Brahmins, our Pandas (spiritual guides) were from a family of Kashmiri Brahmins from Mattan. Mattan today is popularly known as the site of the famous Martand temple of Kashmir. My father tells me that in the past Mattan was a place like Haridwar and was a very important spot on the civilizational routes in Kashmir.

Until about a decade ago, the Panda was visiting our family before he migrated to his children in the United States. Before him, his forefathers had served my forefathers. I have seen the Panda in my ancestral home in Bhaddu too. He would visit all families in our extended community, checking horoscopes, reading panchang, and suggesting remedies. He would live and eat with us and finally leave after receiving his Dakshina. I'm told that his forefathers would come to Jammu Hills before the onset of peak winters in Kashmir and leave before the onset of summers in Jammu Hills. This certainly proves that this Shivite corridor was known to them and that this corridor was further connected to Kashmir. For that matter, this connectivity is further proved because Sant Ram had a home in Bhaddu while most of his professional life he worked in Kashmir and traveled to and fro. He died an untimely death in the outskirts of Anantnag, in his early forties while on his way back home in Bhaddu.

When I first visited Rampur Rasool, I aimed to trace "Padain da Talla" or the pond belonging to the Padhe family, as we were popularly known. I'm addressed as "Padain di kudi" or the daughter of the padhe family by natives. I thus thought Padhe is a

vernacular usage but there's much in history that this word denotes.

Author Avtar Mota wrote an article (25) titled, "When The Marathas Came to Jammu?" He mentioned that after the Marathas lost the battle of Panipat to Ahmed Shah Abdali in 1761, many Maratha soldiers settled in the hilly principalities of Jammu and Punjab for the rest of their lives. Many Maratha Brahmin soldiers became Sanyasin or took to priestly duties for livelihood. According to Mota, people with the surname Sathe, Ranade, Agnihotri, Padhye (Padha), Pant and Pawar in these hills could be from these Maratha lineages.

Mota mentions the story of an acclaimed Dogra writer, Bhagwat Prasad Sathe whose ancestor, Bhaskar Rao Sathe fought against Abdali's forces and after the loss at war moved to Ramnagar in Jammu where he got appointed by the king as a priest and Kathavachak. Bhaskar had left his family at Kashi before the war. An ascetic at Kashi suggested to Bhagwat that he should go to Purmandal on the bank of river Devika in Jammu on a specific auspicious day when many Sadhus gather. Eventually, Bhagwat met his father Bhaskar there.

Purmandal, which is the ancestral village of my maternal grandfather, was on an ancient route between Rajputana and Kashmir. In fact the folklore behind the Purmandal temple which the local balladeers still sing tell the story of a king from Kashmir who came to Purmandal while hunting.

Coming back to Padhe, there are many of them in my extended family both on the paternal and maternal side--there are many Padhe families in this Shivite corridor as well including the priests of certain important temples. I can't verify if they are of Maratha genealogy and if they all came after the third battle of Panipat. And yet I can say that my ancestors could have some Maratha linkage. The closest evidence we have to this is the marriage of my grandfather's sister, Lakshmi to Pt. Gouri Shankar, a Professor of Sanskrit and the first Dogra to be sent on scholarship for a post-doctorate to Oxford in the 1930s by Lahore University. Pt. Gouri came from an ancestry of Sanskrit vidvans who were authors of original Sanskrit works. He had traced their Maratha lineage through their gotra. He mentioned it to be the same as that of Bal Gangadhar Tilak (26).

What this indicates more than anything is the connectivity of the Western Himalayas with the rest of India in history. If the Maratha soldiers could resettle after the battle of Panipat in the hills, it certainly signifies the presence of well-known routes. Since the ASI has attested architectural monuments in this region and since they incidentally fall on these routes that I'm trying to document, it simply means the routes and ancient temples predated the battles of Panipat and the escaping soldiers simply followed the pilgrimage routes for safer haven.

Briggs also mentions (21) Gorakhnath in “Maratha Kunbis” who were later recruited in Nizam's Dominions.

Briggs mentions various Gorakhnath Yogis that evolved out of Gorakhnath traditions with different names in different places--he talks about “Nathas” in Kulu, “Samyog” of the Punjab and “Jogi Padha” of Ambala--just to quote a few.

An amusing anecdote came to my memory while going through Briggs's book. While growing up we were brought up in a very strict culture and my father, a devoted performer of daily rituals, would use his pahadi lexicon while disciplining us. If we were not listening to him or if he was frustrated with us, he would call us “dom”. A girl was called domni. We, including my mother who grew up in Jammu city, wondered what this word means.

I finally discovered its meaning in Briggs's book. In his chapter on “Vows,” he wrote:

“For the Yogi, Hadi by name, who figures in that story was a sweeper (Dom) by caste.”

Hadi was actually “Hadisiddha” whom Briggs mentioned thrice in his book.

In Dharma Mangala, Dinesh Chandra Sen, mentioned that the “ballads of the Pala kings of Bengal have the distinct marks of Buddhism on them and indicate the marvelous powers wielded by Gorakhnath and Hadisiddha. They were popular. Hadi was a Dom,” wrote the author.

I guess my father or the paternal family picked up the word “dom” from some ascetic camping at the Bhaddu temple. Some ascetics might have gotten irritated with mischievous children and could have scolded them calling them dom.

Dogra Historian Shivnirmohi mentions the presence of Sakya Buddhist rulers in Billawar before the coming of Palvanshis from Gandhara-Taxila in his book, Duggar Ka Etihaas (6). He narrates the folklore about Bhogpal from Almora who came to Panjtirthi.

Nirmohi refers to the work of Kahan Singh Balloria, another noted Dogra historian, who has given a list of Bhogpal's 14 descendants in his book six of which are Sakya. Balloria has clubbed the two together. Bhogpal's 14 descendants were followed by another line of six Sakya rulers from 940 AD to 1090 AD: Raja Dev Sakya, Raja Bhog Sakya, Raja Aapr Sakya, Raja Ganey Sakya, Raja Trilok Sakya and Raja Kalas. All these were Buddhist. Nirmohi once told me that there has been no analysis of the presence of Sakya rulers in Billawar.

Gorakhnathis share history and traditions with certain branches of Buddhism, particularly with Vajrayana, and Briggs might provide us with some clues about the presence of Sakyas in Billawar.

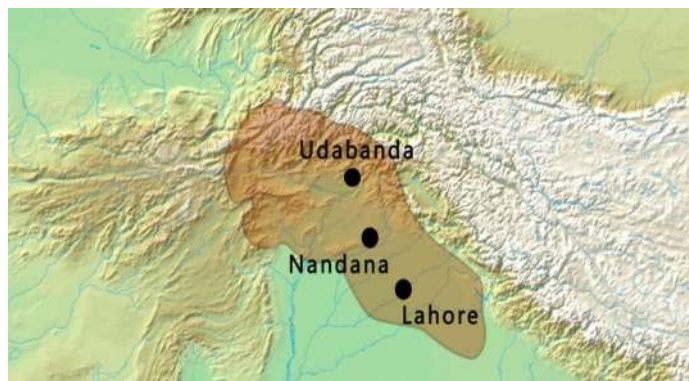
“According to Bengal traditions, Gorakhnath was originally a Buddhist by the name of Ramanavajra belonging to the Vajrayana. He became a convert to Saivism, took the new name, and became the great protagonist of the latter cult.”

“Ramifications of the sect of the Kanphatas in the north-west and beyond the borders of India, point to Buddhist influences.”

The presence of Sakya rulers in this corridor again implies connectivity and cultural mainstreamism of this corridor in the western Himalayas with the rest of India.

The Four Kingdoms of Hindu Shahis

Hindu Shahis or the Palvanshis are remembered in history for their decades of wars with the Gaznavide Turks. The Shahis were the rulers of a massive kingdom spanning across what's today eastern Afghanistan, northern Pakistan, and Punjab. By their presence and rule in this extremely strategic region between what's today Middle East Asia and India we can infer that their kingdom was at a crossroads with important civilizational routes like the Silk Route and the ancient grand trunk road or the Uttarapatha. They thus bore the most brutal onslaught in history.



A map of the kingdom of Hindu Shahis before the Gaznavide attacks.

With each loss at war with the Gaznavides, the Shahis lost their territory, treasury, and army. Jayapala, the greatest of the Hindu shahi rulers died in a johar (self-immolation) at Lahore after his third loss at war. The place of his johar is still marked at Lahore--his son and grandsons also continued with the fight but met the same fate.



King Jayapala as represented on a plaque at the site in Lahore old city where he performed Johar after losing three wars from Gaznavide turks.

Gaznavi not only took away their kingdom, destroyed their temples, and overtook the trade routes they controlled and earned from—he decimated their identity and lineage to such an extent, in certain cases even forcibly converting them, that India retained no historical records of the Hindu Shahis. Anybody who came to help them met the same fate. Even Kalhana expresses ignorance as to what happened with the Shahis.

Kalhana said: "That Sahi kingdom whose greatness on the earth has above been briefly indicated in the account of King Sankaravarman's reign—now one asks oneself whether, with its kings, ministers, and its court, it ever was or was not."

Thanks to Islamic historians, however, some records of the Hindu Shahis and their plight are known.

Alberuni had witnessed their downfall and wrote: "This Hindu Shahiya dynasty is now extinct, and of the whole house there is no longer the slightest remnant in existence. We must say that, in all their grandeur, they never slackened in the ardent desire of doing that which is good and right, that they were men of noble sentiment and noble bearing."

Dogra historian Padmashri Shiv Nirmohi thinks that the Hindu Shahis after losing their kingdom and riches to Gaznavi escaped into the lower Shivalik hills (6) which were then the neighboring heights to the east of their actual kingdom. According to Nirmohi, the Hindu shahis established four small kingdoms at Bhaddu, Basoli, Bhaderwah, and Kulu (in today's Himachal Pradesh) and for very long-lived low profile—some even lived with pseudo identities like some rulers in Basoli, to escape persecution. Nirmohi has documented the vanshavalis or genealogy of the rulers of these kingdoms.



A view from the village Kishnapur, about five miles from Panjithirithi in Billawar tehsil of Kathua district.

It's important to understand this context of the Hindu Shahis for two reasons vis-a-vis our area of research:

1. Recent research on Hindu Shahi temple ruins in Pakistan (27) has for the first time thrown light on the architectural heritage and the routes of the Hindushahis. This is of interest to me because it can open new avenues of comparative research between ancient temples spread across Jammu's wider

region and the architectural features of some of their documented temples in Pakistan. It may even shed new light on the history and heritage of the Billkeshwar temple.

2. If Nirmohi's proposition about Hindushahi presence in lower Shivaliks is correct we can attempt to draw a socio-culture parallel between their existence in their original kingdom by comprehending the uniqueness of their culture in Bhaddu, Basoli, Bhaderwah, and Kullu. Within this ambit, my main focus is the naga culture of these four regions and the further validation of the Billkeshwar-Kailash Corridor which predated the onset of Gaznavide invasions.

By establishing this, I'm attempting to highlight the thought that the culture of the larger Indus basin in history was intricately connected, though there were variations depending upon which cultural ecosystem they shared boundaries and held exchanges with.

Because of a geographically connected land and similar topography, people across this wider basin have shared history, culture, and fundamentals to the development of their rituals and beliefs. Larger Jammu's history has remained unclaimed because, after partition, Jammu's traditional civilizational connectivity was obstructed while its history remained unidentified as subservient to a narrative of Kashmir.

We were often told we have no history other than the history of the Jamwal maharajas or some royal kingdoms and war theatrics before them. Even while doing this research whenever I have contacted officials in Jammu, I was only told that the idols in Bilkeshwar temple are local deities and have no significant historical identity.

In light of this situation, I would propose a new chapter in the history of the region that's not centered around Kashmir and derives its narrative from comparisons with Kashmir's heritage but a separate field of knowledge/study based on the heritage of the transboundary Indus River Basin--beginning from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, and Ladakh.

With this, I'll attempt to highlight the Hindu Shahi's socio-cultural and architectural heritage on both sides of today's boundaries through the Shaivite corridor of my field of interest between Ravi-Ujh and Kailash and Agli Dhar range. My proposition thus takes Nirmohi's research on Hindu Shahi migration to lower Shivaliks (6) as an actual historic event/happening.

Gandhara School of Nagara Architecture

Michael W. Meister, a professor of South Asian studies at the University of Pennsylvania and the general editor of the Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture is probably one of the very few authors to have researched the Hindu temples of Pakistan (27).

His book "Temples of the Indus, Studies in the Hindu Architecture of Ancient Pakistan" is primarily about the Hindushahi temple ruins in northwest Pakistan—incidentally, the entire sequence is on the ancient routes through which the Hindushahis traveled. These routes were an important reason for which Gaznavi invaded their kingdom because their land was sandwiched between the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia—their geostrategic value was exactly what Pakistan is today. I understand that temples didn't bear the brunt of Gaznavi's violence because of religion alone, it was the trade routes and economy that traveled through them that he had his sight on and temples were the milestones on these routes.

Since these temples were on such an important civilizational intersection, they must have been the home to a lot of cultural amalgamation.

Prof. Meister says that these temples were neither fully like the traditional Kashmir temple architecture nor like the classical Indian Nagara style of architecture—according to him these temples show an amalgam of styles—thus showcasing a unique and independent architectural technique and he calls it "Gandhara-Nagara typology."

"Combining some elements from Buddhist architecture in Gandhara with the symbolically powerful curvilinear Nagara tower formulated in the early post-Gupta period, this group stands as an independent school of that pan-Indic form, offering new evidence for its creation and original variations in the four centuries of its existence," Meister writes in the description to his book.

I'm not a student of Ancient Indian Temple architecture and I'm not capable of doing an architectural review because for that I would need to understand the ancient temple architecture and its varied regional styles. I had written to the now-aged Dr. Meister but didn't get a reply. I comprehend it to be an extensive field of study that can open a new chapter into the integrated history of the Indus River Basin of the last 1000 years. It would in itself be an extremely extensive field of research. Maybe, my travels will bring me across more researchers and opportunities in this context in the future but as of now, this is all I can fathom.

It should also be noted that some of the earliest known Hindu shahi inscriptions (28) are in Sharda like the Dewai inscription of Shahi king Bhimadeva (9th-10th century) and the Barikot inscription of the great Shahi ruler, Jayapala (9th-10th century). Sharda inscriptions were found as far as Chamba up till 12th-13 century

BC.

Why has it been the case that no historical focus was given to the region between Kashmir and Chamba after 1947 despite the pre-partition work of the archeologists of the Jammu and Kashmir kingdom like Kak? How is it that whatever they had documented, particularly on Gurnal doesn't exist anymore? Where did it go?

Hindu Shahi's Naga Culture

The historical corridor of my interest between the Ravi and Ujh has a dominating Naga culture as already discussed earlier. While any research on the cultural practices of Hindu Shahi of 1000 years ago no longer exists, if we consider Nirmohi's preposition of their migration to this corridor as valid, we have an opportunity to gain some insight into their culture by studying the Naga culture and anthropology of this region.

I also believe this Naga culture wasn't a separate, independent religion but rather a sub-sect within ancient Shaivism. Briggs writes about the extinction of various Shaivism sub-sects or the merging of some cults into others in history. There is a lot still unknown. Some modern researchers in Jammu like Raja Sourav Singh Sarmal of the Sarmal dynasty of Samba who describes his clan as that of Syavastris warriors, talk about Naga worship as a part of the wider Shamanic culture prevalent in the larger region. Whatever its origin, it's important to note that the Naga culture, nomenclature, worship, and rituals are juxtaposed with the geography of the region.

A substantial chunk of Pakistan that borders today's Jammu and Kashmir is hilly and mountainous. The human-drawn border hasn't changed the geography or the terrain that exists in continuity on both sides. A terrain in continuity simply means natural routes defined by geography existing since antiquity.

Connected geography also implies journeying humanity and a shared culture of Shaivism and Naga worship. Much literature exists to prove this, including Briggs's book.

Geography, terrain, and water resources are intrinsic elements of Naga culture. It's not explicitly recognized but the cultural practices and folklore prove it. My grandfather used to talk about Nagas as mythic beings with extraterrestrial existence as if he had seen them. I have interviewed multiple people in their nineties who can narrate stories of Nagas in their family lineage.

I have already detailed in earlier chapters how Naga culture predominates in this western Himalayan region. It would have likely once defined the cultural practices of the wider Indus River basin spreading from what's today eastern Afghanistan to Pakistan, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal, and Punjab.

J. Ph. Vogel (18) in his book "Indian Serpent Lore or the Nagas in Hindu Legend and Art" talks about the "Nag pal of Bhadarvah" and "How the eighteen Nagas of Kulu were Born" in the chapter "The Nagas as They Survive in Worship and Legend."

Vogel also talks about the naga legends preserved by Chinese pilgrims traveling through Gandhara. And while talking about the Naga culture in the hills regions of Punjab (meaning the Western Shivaliks which is the region of interest of this study), he said:

“We may derive further corroborative evidence from the character of Naga worship as it exists in the western Himalayas up to the present day. The rural population of the Punjab Hills still worships the Nags, and—which is a point of great interest—the nature of these godlings agrees in all essentials with that of the Nagas of the Rajataraiigini. On the whole, they are local deities, their worship being restricted to a special village or other locality. They are water-spirits, hence their capricious character: in worshipping them the alternately beneficial and destructive power of the water is propitiated. To win their favor, their worshippers endeavor to please them by means of music, offerings of flowers and incense, and even by occasionally sacrificing a goat or a ram.”

Vogel, who had participated in archeological excavations in Gandhara and the Punjab Hill states, wrote his book in 1933. The Naga culture he mentioned in the hilly states of Western Himalayas still exists as such in the region. The Nag Pal of Bhaderwah and the 18 Nagas of Kulu are of special interest to me because Nirmohi talks about Hindu Shahis establishing their kingdoms in these regions after their defeat by Gaznavi.

Nag Pal was the son of Raja Bisambar Pal and the contemporary of the Mughal emperor Akbar. His birth is said to be divinely ordained by Nagas as he was conceived in a Nag temple after the untimely death of his father. Folklore talks about him being born with a mythic Naga fang that emerged from his back and that's why he was called Nag Pal. Stories talk about his presence in Akbar court where he once also displayed his snake-hood to the Mughal king.

“Then Akbar became very much afraid, and promised him a boon, if he would take the snake back. So the Raja did, and obtained the privilege of the royal drums (nauhat), which up to the present day are beaten in the temple of Baski Nag at Bhadarvah,” wrote Vogel. Beating of drums at Basak nag shrines in these hills continues to be a daily practice in many shrines. I have witnessed it at the four-century-old Basak Nag temple at Panyalag.

Bhaderwah appears to be the main center of Naga culture because it's from here that it was introduced to places like Chamba in the 19th century, according to Vogel. He also talks in detail about the Kulu valley as another epicenter of Nag worship.

“Here, too, Baski or Basu, as the ancient serpent-king Vasuki is commonly called by the Kulu people, is regarded as the chief of his tribe and as the father of the other Nags scattered over the various villages.”

Vogel mentioned a noted saying in Kullu, “Atharah Nag atharah Narayan.”

This means “There be Nags eighteen and Narayans eighteen.” According to him the word “Narayan” was used in hills to “denote a being closely related to nag.” Eighteen according to the author denotes an auspicious number in the hills.

While traveling through Bani in September 2024, a Chela at Duggan village told me the Naga worshipers have a unique panchang that differs from general Panchang. This Panchang is read to determine the date of their pilgrimage to Kailash Kund in Baderwah—that is how different villages, with different Naga shrines select different dates for their pilgrimage. He also told me Naga shastras are waiting to be discovered.



Picture of the Chela or the oracle at Duggan village.

This to me certainly indicates that there's an entire science of astrology, medicine, and hydrogeology that is unique to Naga-worshiping regions and that is waiting to be discovered. This science is likely the basis of a unique but widely prevalent Naga culture in the western Himalayas with its epicenter at the sacred Kailash Kund lake in Bhaderwah.

It's very likely that when Hindu Shahis migrated from their lost kingdom to these western Himalayan regions they weren't traveling on untrodden routes. Their original kingdom in what is today's Pakistan was itself marked by important civilizational routes that were in geographic continuity with the pilgrimage routes that led to Baderwah. They simply followed these routes known to humanity and took shelter in these thickly forested regions with pseudo names, as Nirmohi says.

They would have brought some culture along while they would have also imbibed some from the existing populations.

Concluding Recommendations

1. Let's discover the history of this region and create a connectivity corridor defined for adventure, culture, and religious tourism.
2. Establish a National Institute of Mountaineering in Baderwah or Kishwar on the same lines as those existing and operated by the Ministry of Defense in Kashmir, Himachal, Uttarkashi, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh.

3. Create a "National Shivalik Education Route" with educational institutions established on civilizational trails. Design educational institutions specific to specific regions' needs as well as their specific identities. Define a vision for each region on the trail with a common focus on three Cs: Connectivity, Cooperatives, and Capacity Building. Integrate the vision into designing an educational route.
4. Create a "special educational economy zone" at the trijunction between Basoli, Pathankot, and Kangra. Invite the three wings of the defense to contribute to this trijunction by establishing some of its educational institutions.
5. Instead of a usual dam on Ujh at Panjtherthee, create a Shivite corridor with a special heritage spot at Panjtherthee. Let this spot and its architecture be based on the traditional temple architecture of Hindu Shahis and the Jageshwar temples of Almora. Believe in creating an innovative approach for flood control in this massive river bed while keeping its ancient historical and cultural identity intact.

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Kailash kuṇḍ, a key Himalayan pilgrimage site and a subject of this research, highlights the ancient concept and practice of tīrthayātrā, an essential duty in Sanatana Dharma, which is glorified in the Mahābhārata (Araṇya 80:38cd) as superior to sacrifices: *tīrthābhigamaṇaṃ puṇyaṃ yajñairapi viśiṣyate*

**Dr. R. Sathyanarayana Sarma
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