

Historical Geography of Chaurasi Temple, Bharmour, Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract:

A close relationship between history and geography has long been recognized by various scholar. Herodotus who is considered as the father of History, was one of the pioneer geographers. He was a strong supporter of the idea that all history must be treated geographically and geography must be treated historically. In this present paper an attempt has been made to study the historical geography of Chaurasi Temple located in Bharmour. Bharmour, formally known as Brahmपुरa was the ancient capital of Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh, India. It is situated at an altitude of 7000 feet in the budhil valley, about sixty two kilometres to the south-east of Chamba. Bharmour is known for its scenic beauty and for its ancient temples. Ancient evidences shows that the Chaurasi temple was built in 7th century, although the repairs of many temple have been carved out in later period. The major temples located in Chaurasi are Ganesh Temple, Lakshana Devi temple, lord Shiva temple, Nar Singh temple and Dharameswar temple. These temples have immense religious importance for local community and life of people centre around these temple.

Key Words: History, Chaurashi temple, Bharmour

Introduction

The origin of Chamba is not known definitely but it came into existence around 6th century A.D. out of the turmoils caused by the invasion of Huns and other tribes from north west of India and consequent disintegration of the Gupta empire. Nucleus of the state was the present Bharmour-Brahmapura of the ancient times as mentioned by Vrahmihira in Brhatsamhita.¹ The Chamba Rajas divided the whole of the state into five Mandals, laterr on known as wazarats. These wazarats or administrative provinces have been Chamba, Brahmour, Bhatti or Bhattiyat, Churah and Pangi. The division was based on the location of each region exclusive from the other regions due to high mountains, deep rivers and thick forested tracts. This topographical exclusiveness caused the evolution of highly varied dialects, life styles, costumes, ornaments, fairs, festivals, dietary habits and other social and cultural manifestation in all the five regions of the state.

Bharmour, formally known as Brahmpura, was the ancient capital of Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh, India. Situated at an altitude of 7000 feet in the budhil valley, forty miles to the south-east of Chamba. Bharmour is known for its scenic beauty and for its ancient temples. As the whole area around Bharmour is supposed to belong to lord Shiva, it is popularly spoken of as Shiva Bhumi, adobe of lord Shiva. It lies between Pir-Panchal and Dhauladhar range, between Ravi and Chenab valley. The land is blessed with deep beauty of abundant alpine pastures and provides home for nomadic shepherds, known as Gaddi, thus also called Gadderan. The foothills are filled with apple orchards and terraced farmsteads. The epitome of spirituality lies in this land as it is endow with ancient temples. The area goes through inhospitable terrain and severe climate changes. The “Kailash Vasio” as the people of Bharmour are known are extremely courteous and welcomes you like their own family member. Along with its ethnic traditions, culture and ancient history, Bharmour forms the perfection of divine splendour.

Meru, the father of the first recorded prince Jaistambh in the Chamba Vanshavali was the first to settle Bharmour. He belonged to a ruling family of Ayodhya. Accompanied by his youngest son Jaistambh, Meru penetrated into the upper Ravi valley through the outer hills. He defeated the petty Ranas holding the territory there and founded the town Brahmpura and made it the capital of a new state. This event is believed to have taken place in the middle of 6th century A.D.

According to one legend, the name Brahampura was in use at a still earlier period for the more ancient kingdom of Bharmour which existed in the territories of Garhwal and Kumaon, and that Meru gave the same name of Brahampura to the state that he founded with present Bharmour as his capital. After Meru, several Rajas ruled in succession until Sahil Varman. It was Sahil Varman who conquered the lower Ravi valley and transferred the seat of government from Brahampura to the new capital he founded at Chamba. Bharmour was capital for nearly four hundred years. In September 2007, the Government of Himachal Pradesh started chopper service to the temple located at an altitude of 14,000 ft.

Objectives of the study

The present study aims at analysing following set of objectives:

1. To examine the historical origin and importance of chaurasi temple of Bharmour.
2. To identify the major temples of Chaurasi and their significance to local community.

Data Base and Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. The secondary data sources are Vedic literature and archaeological sources. The modern literary sources mainly included books, journals and unpublished reports. The primary data sources are formal interaction with local Pujari and people. The photographs also taken to depict the archaeological structure of Chaurasi.

Reconstruction of past landscape on the basis of historical evidences has also been the important method to study the historical geography. In course of the discussion on aim and methods of reconstruction of the past, the different approaches namely the evolution of the culture landscape and the study of geographical changes through the time are adopted in the present study. Finally, the integrated approach has been used to collection, collation and analysis of data and historical facts.

Discussion

Chaurasi temple is complex temple located in centre of Bharmour town. This temple has a great religious value as temple was built around 1400 years ago. The temple of Ganesha, Lakshmi, Narsingh and Manimahesh completes Chaurasi Temple. Chaurasi is hindi word for number Eighty Four. There are several stories and believes about this ancient Chaurasi complex. Some of them are given below. There is a beautiful temple of Manimahesh in shikhara style located at centre of the complex. It is believed that when 84 Siddhas, who had come from kurukshetra, were passing through Bharmour to visit Manimahesh, they fell in love with the calmness and beauty of Bharmour and for friendly relation between nature to meditate here. Chaurasi Temple Complex was built approximately in 7th century, although repairs of many temples have been carried out in later period.

There is a beautiful story about this temple which is also linked with District Chamba. It is believed that 84 yogis visited this place at the time of Sahil Varman. Yogi's were pleased with hospitality of Sahil Verman. Yogi promised Varman 10 sons as Sahil Varman was not blessed with any Son or Daughter. King requested them to stay back in Brahampura (old name of Bharmour) till the prediction of Yogis was fulfilled. In due course of time the king was blessed with ten sons and a daughter. Daughter was named Champavati and because of liking of Champavati new capital Chamba was established. So in respect of these yogi's this clean, delightful and great scenic view temple was built by King Varman. (Plate 1)



Plate 1. Chaurasi Campus

Major temples at Chaurasi temple complex

Lakshana Devi Temple

The Lakshana Devi temple in Bharmour is a post-Gupta era Hindu temple in Himachal Pradesh dedicated to Durga in her Mahishasura-mardini form. It is dated to the second half of the 7th-century and is in part one of the oldest surviving wooden temples in India.² The temple is the oldest surviving structure of the former capital of Bharmour, also referred to as Bharmaur, Barmawar, Brahmor or Brahmapura in historic texts.³ Its roof and walls have been repaired over the centuries and it looks like a hut, but the Himachal Hindu community has preserved its intricately carved wooden entrance, interior and ceiling that reflects the high art of late Gupta style and era. The design and a late Gupta script inscription below the brass metal goddess statue in its sanctum confirms its antiquity.⁴ The wooden carvings include Shaivism and Vaishnavism motifs and themes. (Plate 2a and Plate 2b)

Lakshana Devi Temple



Plate 2a. Lakshana Devi Temple



Plate 2b. Wooden Carving

The inscription mentions Meruvarman and three of his ancestors attested by other texts found in Himachal Pradesh. The reign of Meruvarman is generally dated to have begun in 680 CE.¹³ This traced with other epigraphic and textual evidence, has helped date this temple to be either from late 7th or the early 8th century.

The temple shows the Gupta era architecture and artwork in wood.¹⁴ It faces north and it currently has a rectangular plan with about 11.6 metres (38 ft) external length and 8.73 metres (28.6 ft) width.¹⁵ The temple sits on a square wooden jagati, about 0.45 metres (1 ft 6 in) above the ground. The earlier versions of the temple had a combination of weight bearing wood and non-weight bearing stone walls. The external wall of the temple was later plastered with mud, reaching a current thickness of about 0.85 metres (2 ft 9 in).¹⁶

The entrance and the facade of the temple have been cleaned by the Archaeological Survey of India after 1950s, revealing the finer details that were not visible to Cunningham, Vogel or Goetz. It is similar to the late Gupta style, with three parallel panels surrounding the doorway flanked by river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna.¹⁷ Each band is separated by a thin carving of a floral scroll carved on a convex wood surface. The outer wooden band consists of reliefs of single females standing in tribhanga posture and of amorous couples. The middle wooden band features Ganga standing on makara on left and Yamuna standing on tortoise on right, with their attendants. Above them are a series of Hindu deities, including Shiva with Nandi, Vishnu Vaikunthamurti, four armed Vishnu and Skanda (Kartikeya). A goddess and god in this panel are not identifiable because their iconographic signs are too eroded. The inner panel forms the door frame of the entrance. The inner panel is carved with natural motifs such as leaves and flowers, two peacocks with their beak joined, and a pair of amorous couples in a mithuna scene.¹⁸

The sanctum contains a 7th century brass statue of Durga, locally called Lakshana Devi. She is shown with four arms, holding a trishula in one hand, a sword in another and a bell in third. Her left front hand holds the tail of the shape shifting deceptive buffalo-demon (Mahishasura). Her right foot is on the head of the buffalo-demon, as she kills the evil demon.¹⁹

Ganesh Temple

Lord Ganesha temple is situated near the entrance of Chaurasi temple, Bharmour. The temple was constructed by the rulers of the Varman dynasty as stated in an inscription erected in the temple, by Meru Verman in circa 7th century A.D. The wooden temple of ganesha was

probably set on fire during Kira invasion of Bharmour and image was mutilated by cutting off legs. Lord Ganesha temple is near the entrance because in hinduism lord Ganesha is worshipped before any other god and before starting any work. (Plate 3)



Plate. 3 Ganesh Temple

The temple of Ganesha is enshrined in a bronze image of Ganesha. This magnificent image is life size with both legs missing. The god is seated on a lion throne and bearing a snake as a sacred thread (Yajnopavita). The three eyed god has a rosary, his tusk, hatched and a plate of sweets (laddus) in his hand as attributes. The deity is shown wearing a tiger skin jacket (Vyagracharma) from which is revealed his abdominal muscles and deep navel. The body is muscular and stout and seems to be awe inspiring. The body has a square cell surrounded by constricted verandah (pardakshana path) and topped by relatively lately built sloping slate roof. The shrine stands near the entrance to the Chaurasi compound.

Manimahesh/Lord Shiva temple

Manimahesh temple which stands in the centre of Chaurasi temple, is main temple, enshrining a huge Shiva linga. The Shiva linga is nothing but a symbol of characteristic mark of lord Shiva and is worshiped in a symbol. In reality it is identical with the lord almighty which has been described as creator, protector and destroyer of entire universe. While creating this universe he assumes the form of Brahma, while protecting it assumes form of Vishnu and while destroying the form of Rudra. (Plate 4a and Plate 4b)

The temple enshrining Shiva linga resting on the huge square plinth was rebuilt by Raja Sahila Varman during first half of tenth century AD. This monumental temple with high beehive shikhara bearing no sculptures on the outer surface is of middle Pratihara type. It is

Manimahesh/Lord Shiva Temple



Plate 4a in 19th Century

Plate 4b. Present View

similar to the early temples of Chamba town and like them has been built on a model of sahila's lakhshami narayana temple, Chamba town. The repairs of the temples were carried out by Raja Udai Singh (1690-1720 AD).²⁰

Lord Nandi bull/Nandi temple

The life size metal bull Nandi, locally known as Nandigan with the broken ear and tail can be seen standing in a modern shed in front of Manimahesh temple. Nandi is chief of Ganas and Shiva's foremost attendant, who had shape of the bull and qualities of noble devotee. Usually in front of Shiva temples the shilpa texts provide for a couchant bull paced outside and staring at his lord Shiva. But here we have a life size Nandi bull standing on all fours (legs). Visnudharmotra purana, however describes of such Nandi bull, as representing solidity and stability of dharma. (Plate 5)



Plate 5. Lord Nandi bull

Deodar-The God-wood at Chaurasi temple

The Chaurasi is partly shaded by huge Cedrus tree, which is visible from great distance away. It grows near the Manimahesh temple. It is regarded as sacred and no branch of it may be cut down. A Cedrus tree looked upon as sacred and is called deodar, the god-wood, if it grows near the Shiva temple. The name, Deodar, goes all the way back to the Indo-Aryan language of Sanksrit where the word devadaru comes from combining deva (god) and daru (wood). There are many stories associated with association of deodar and Lord Shiva. It is believed that this tree is dear to Shiva because he planted his linga on earth in the vicinity of deodar forest on first instance. Another reference in that Hindu mythology mentions that the formidable Lord Shiva was meditating under a deodar tree, when Kamadeva, the god of love disturbed him. Angered, Shiva opened his third eye and burnt Kamadeva to cinders. Through this legend, the deodar has remained closely connected with the worship of Shiva in Himalayas. Often a tree is built near or around a special tree which is regarded as his embodiment. The Linga Purana also mentions the visit of Shiva in Bhikshatana form to Deodar Forest to entice the wives of sages, who had taken up habits detrimental to the perpetuation of a healthy social order if a Cedrus tree is found in the close proximity of the Devi temple then it is called devidaar. There are many instances of huge cedrus trees growing near Shiva and Devi temple. The temple of Manimahesh Shiva is located near Deodar at centre of Chaurasi temple (Plate 6a and Plate 6b).



Plate 6a. Deodar Feature

Plate 6b. Deodar-God wood

Dharmeshvar Mahadev/Dharamraj temple

Dharamraj, known as Dharmeshvar mahadev was given a seat on the northern corner of Chaurasi by Maru Varman. It is now enshrined in a temple made of stone and wood with pendent roof of slate covering. It is the belief of locals that soul of every true Shiva devotee travels through this temple after death seeking dwelling in Shiva loka. It is believed to be the court of Dharamraj and is locally called ‘dhai-podi’, which means two and half steps. These steps now may be located below the temple. It is also designated asdyodhi (portico) by gaddis. It is believed that every departed soul stands here to seek final permission of Dharamraj to proceed ahead. There are many stories told by the old priests of these temples which are told to them by their



forefathers. When a Raja of Chamba was seen standing in front of the temple of Dharmeshavar mahadev and performing

paradakshana (ambulatory round) around Chaurasi and proceeding to Kailash on his horse back, this was taken to be indication of the king's demise in his palace at Chamba town. (Plate 7)



Plate 7. Dharamraj Temple

Plate 8. Seat of Chitragupt

Seat of Chitragupt

Just in front of temple of Dharmeshvar mahadev is a shila (stone slab) protected by a wooden fencing on which is carved a ring and paduka (foot prints). It is said to be seat or a court of Chitragupt, who keeps record of good and evil deeds of every living being in this world. (Plate 8)

Nar Singh/Narasimha Temple

Narsingh temple is devoted to lord Narasimha, an incarnation of lord Vishnu in which the god is represented in two forms i.e. half man and half lion.

Narasimha (Sanskrit: Narsingh) or Nrusimha, also spelled as Narasingh, Narsingh and Narasingha, whose name literally translates from Sanskrit as “Man-lion”. Narsingh temple has a bronze image of this god, which is exquisitely cast, is awe-inspiring. The alloy used for casting this image has greater content of copper which makes the surface of the bronze somewhat reddish thus suitably agreeing with the terrible form of god. Narasimha is represented as stout muscular figure with terrific lion's head, mane fully blown, staring at the viewer with wide open eyes and half open mouth. His two hands are held up with extended claws and other two hands are folded under the chin. The deity is sitting on a throne decorated with stylized mountain scenery and gaping lion at both ends.



Plate 9. Narshing Temple



Plate 10. Naga Baba Temple

The idol of Narasimha is housed in nagara style temple of stone which is smaller in size than Manimahesh shiva temple and situated on the western side of compound above the decline of the hill. It was erected by Rani Tribhuvan Rekha and endowed by Raja Yugakar Varman in about 950 AD. (Plate 9)

Jai krishan Giri ji/ Naga baba Temple

Jai krisan ji or giri-Naga baba temple, near Narsimha temple, has a modern shrine with conical roof and has been built which enshrines a beautiful and serene marble image of Shri 108 shri jai krisan ji (Plate 10). It is believed that he performed penance (tapasya) clad only in a Lion cloth on snow bounded ridges of Dhancho. He finally settled in Chaurasi Bharmour. He is held in great respect by the people of Chamba and is known even outside. He was full of compassion and loved every one. Baba being aware of the halo surrounding of Chaurasi made it his Tapobhumi. He brought about many social and cultural reforms and is known for upholding the sanctity of Chaurasi (84) temples and old temples of Bharmour. He is revered as 85th siddha who lived at Chaurasi in the modern times. He was finally buried at the site of shrine in Chaurasi. It is said that the sky became cloudy and restless winds blew as the exalted soul departed on his heavenly journey to Shiva loka on 22nd sept 1963.

Ardh Ganga/Ardh Gaya

Ardhgaya (ardhaganga) there is pool of crystal clear water in the eastern corner of the complex popularly known Ardhgaya as which is also called Ardhganga and Guptaganga. A dip in its holy waters is considered auspicious as is corroborated by following legend. Once Shiva, Parvati and their son Ganesha were camping in Bharmour. Shiva in his leisurely

moments told Parvati of the great importance of certain holy tirthas. Parvati was moved and she expressed her desire to take a dip in Falgu river of Gaya. Shiva showed his inability to grant the devi's wish being far away from river. At this Parvati was upset and disconsolate. Realizing the gravity of situation Ganesha shot an arrow in the earth and there jutted forth water in seven springs as sacred as seven major rivers of India including Falgu of Gaya and Ganga. Parvati bathed in the water of this spring and felt gratified. Thus it is believed that a dip in the Ardhgaya pool will wash all the sins of the devotees. (Plate 11)



Plate 11. Ardh Ganga

Rameshvar Linga/Trameshwar Mahadev

This linga is enshrined in a temple situated on the western side of Chaurasi. It is ascribed to raja Maru Varman (early 8th century AD). It is also called Trameshvar by local residents because its pitha is encased in chase copper sheet once inlaid with silver flower rosettes. Hermann Goetz is of the opinion that this linga is real suryavansha linga which is still standing on the copper yoni in Bharmour. He also referred this linga as Surajamukh linga which is also belief of local people. It was enshrined in an ancient temple but the present temple is built in dressed stone with sloping roof of slates under which run the circumambulatory path around the sanctum. The name Rameshvar is derived from famous linga which lord Rama had installed before leaving for Lanka. The rajas of Chamba trace their ancestry to lord Rama. According to vanshawali (genealogy) of rajas of Chamba, Rama ruling from Ayodhya is listed in the verse number twenty of the table and Maru who first settled in the village of Kalapa and later founded Brahmapura in Budhal valley is listed at verse number thirty five.

Surya Linga/Surya Linga Mahadev

Surya linga or Suryavanshi linga which stands in a modern shed near *ard ganga* or *gupt ganga* is the family deity of the suryavanshi rajas of chamba. Tradition affirms that the Surya linga was installed by Raja Maru who belonged to the ruling family of Ayodhya. Being a man of religious disposition he wandered from place to place in quest of peace and came to this part of the country. When he reached Khadamukh, people here requested him to settle in Brahmapura. Conceding to the request he installed the linga as a symbol of founding the kingdom of Suryavansha under lordship of Shiva. Thus the linga came to known as Surya linga. After establishing the kingdom he handed it over to his son Jaisthambha who had accompanied him. An ancient custom, it makes it obligatory for Chamba Rajas to pay obeisance at the temple of Surya linga first and then perform their duties.

Kuber Linga Mahadev/Kubera linga

Kubera, the lord of wealth and friend of Shiva is also given a place in the Chaurasi complex. It is a small linga enshrined in a miniature Nagara shrine on the left side of Manimahesh temple.

Kelang/Swami Kartik Temple

On the right side of the entrance to Lakshana devi stands a small platform covered with a roof peculiar to small village shrine. In it is kept an upright stone symbolizing Kelang, the Kartikeya, the god of war. There is also a small piece of wood in this shrine which is carved with a figure representing Kelang. It appears this piece was offered by some devotee. This god is also called Kelang wazeer or Kelanga – swami or devta by local peasantry. This shrine also contains a six inches high metal idol with two arms holding a danda (staff) and ring, representing the god Kelang. He is also revered as Kartik-swami by locals who have great faith in his miraculous powers. His disciples or chelas wear a sort of red cap as a mark. They are in great demand for performing divine or ritual dance. A marble image of Kartikeya kelang, has also been placed recently along with other votive projects.

Other shrines

Other shrines in the complex are Jyoti linga, Mohoni linga and the lingas representing Gupt-mahadev, Narpat- mahadev (narbadeshvar) and Bijli-mahadev. Linga known as Ekadash rudra (eleven-rudri) is also seen on the platform of Manimahesh temple. Tradition holds that they protect sacred premises of Chaurasi. Lingas on the platform of Manimahesh temple represent Nau-nath meaning nine ascetics of Nath sect. The idols of Chamunda and

Hanuman are placed in the small shrines which are the recent additions to the sanctuary. The image of Shitla devi near aquaduct is also enshrined in wooden temple. Read story of Lord Hanuman and Learn Hanuman Chalisa.

Concluding Remarks

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that Bharmour has rich historical background because it served as an ancient capital of Chamba district. It is also famous for its scenic beauty and historical Chaurasi campus. It is believed that the Chaurasi temple complex was built in 7th century, although the repairs of many temple have been carved out in later period. The major temples located in Chaurasi are Ganesh Temple, Lakshana Devi temple, lord Shiva temple, Nar Singh temple and Dharameswar temple. These temples have immense religious importance for local community and life of people centre around these temples.

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