CHAPTER II

TRADITION: THE ORIGIN & DEVELOPMENT OF
THE GODDESS WORSHIP IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

The Origin of the goddess worship in Himachal Pradesh is one of the most complicated problems of the subject. On one hand we do not come across any archaeological evidence of the pre-historic and proto-historic periods to associate her with the state. Even during the Vedic age direct references to her association with the land of mountains are lacking. On the other hand the literary evidence of the Epic-Puranic period irrevocably associates her with the mountains of Himālaya and numerous stories are to be found in this connection from her birth onwards.

The stone age culture, that has yielded a rich repertoire of stone age tools in the Sivalik range of Himachal has not given any evidence of proto-historic habitation of the early, mature and even late Harappan culture, though on the border of Himachal Pradesh some famous Harappan sites such as Ropar, Kotla Nihang, Bara and Sanghol in Punjab are known. Some pieces of pottery assigned to the late Harappan period have been reported from Sirmur District but they fail to shed any light on our subject. If we believe that the
Harappan culture of Ropar and Bara had penetrated into Himachal then we may talk of the prevalence of the Mother Goddess cult in the mountainous region purely on hypothetical basis.

The early Vedic literature also does not help much in this connection. We have already referred to a large number of goddesses known to the Vedic Aryans and their names have been preserved. But there is no way to know what was their status in this mountainous state. The names of various rivers as goddesses, especially the Sarasvatī which is ‘the greatest of mothers, the greatest of goddesses and the greatest of rivers’ find mention in the *Rigveda.*¹ Since most of these rivers take rise and flow through Himachal Pradesh, it is reasonable to believe that they were held sacred over there also. It may sound highly speculative, but it appears that in such a situation the goddess worship should have been known in the state. The *Brāhmaṇa* literature down to the *Sūtras* is again of no help on this account for lack of any direct reference for or against the issue.

However, if we go by the early concept of Purusha and Prakṛiti as symbols of male and female that dominated the beliefs of mankind from earliest known times, then the knowledge of goddess worship in Himachal can not be denied. As a student of history we still seek the solid ground of evidence to stand upon that we start getting from the Epics and the Purāṇas. We shall start with the *Mahābhārata* that contains several names and stories attached there with Devī. She is the daughter of Himālaya, she is Pārvatī.² She is also Umā, Girṣutā, Girivarātmajā, Parvatārājakanyā, Šailaputrī Šailārājasutā³, references
that cannot be denied her association with the Himalaya mountain by any stretch of imagination.

In the *Mahābhārata* we have several stories regarding Satī or Pārватī both as the consort of Śiva and as the daughter of Daksha Prajāpati or Himālaya. In one such story we are told that she was not a favourite daughter of Daksha. *Dakshayajñāvināśa* story is very interesting and relevant, that is contained both in the *Mahābhārata* and several of the Purāṇas. According to this story, once Daksha organised a great sacrifice (*yajña*) and invited all the gods, *rishis*, *apsarās*, *gandharvas*, etc. but Śiva and Pārватī were not invited nor any share of sacrifice was kept for them. At this Rishi Dadhichī said that it was no sacrifice as Śiva was not invited and became annoyed. At the same time Pārватī also became annoyed at this insult of her husband. Seeing the grief of Umā, Śiva created a terrible person from his mouth who became known as Vīrabhadra and another form of Śiva himself. He went to the sacrifice of Daksha and destroyed it with the help of *ganas* produced from the pores of his body, as such they were known as Raumyagana. Umā also out his anger went to the sacrifice in the form of Mahakall known as Bhadrakall, and destroyed the sacrifice. Daksha thereafter apologised to Śiva and was granted a boon. Almost all the Purāṇas contain this story with slight variations, of which one version is particularly of interest here.

Mahāmāyā incarnated as Satī in the house of Daksha. She blossomed into a beautiful maiden. All the Prajāpatīs joined together and made Śiva marry her. The bride and bridegroom lived in the bride’s house. At that time sage Durvāsā meditated upon Jagdambikā
through māyābīja. The goddess thus pleased gave him a divine garland which he passed on to Daksha. The latter became amorous through the garland’s perfume thus making it impure, which caused the wrath goddess resulting in a curse that made Daksha hate Satī and Śiva. As a result they were not invited to the sacrifice of Daksha. Pārvatī went uninvited and was insulted. Unable to bear the insult she jumped into the sacrificial fire and committed suicide. Šiva became uncontrollable after this and in his sorrow went around carrying the corpse of Satī on his shoulder bringing about the destruction of the world. All the gods became worried on this and requested Vishnu to save the world. Vishnu thereupon cut the corpse of Satī into several pieces with his discus. Wherever these pieces fell Šakti-pīthas were established. As pointed out by D. C. Sircar, the early story of Daksha, as we have narrated above, has nothing to do with the establishment of Šakta Pīthas. In all fifty one Šakta Pīthas are said to have been established. However, in some works their number is given as 108 and some of the names vary from one list to the other. Some of these Pīthas are well-known where as the identity of others is not certain. Amongst the earliest known four Pīthas the name of Jālandhara Pītha occurs prominently. This is a name that covers the region of ancient Trigarta or the land watered by three rivers Ravi, Beas and Satluj. Beside this Jvalāmukhi also occurs as a prominent Šakti-pītha in the Purāṇas. The names of Vipāśa and Chandrabhāgā also occur in this connection. Here it may be noted that Chintapurnī, Jvalāmukhi and Vajreśvarī devī are all located in the region of Vipāśa (Beas) where as the temples of Chamba are located in the Valley of Chandrabhāgā (Chenab).
Coming back to the literary data contained in the Purāṇas there is no place for any doubt that goddess and her origin is closely associated with the Himalayan mountains, Himachal being an integral part of the same. That establishes the tradition of the goddess worship in Himchal Pradesh at least in the Puranic age of the early Gupta period. Since it must have taken a considerable time for these stories to fully develop, we may safely presume that the antiquity of goddess worship in Himachal Pradesh goes back to pre-Christian centuries.

Coming once again to the art and archaeological evidence, it is pertinent to throw a glance at the available data. Amongst the well-known image of the goddess from Himachal Pradesh, the brass images of Lakshṇā Devī and Śakti Devī from Chamba are the foremost. These beautifully carved images bear inscriptions to the effect that they were installed by Mahārāja Meruvarman and fashioned by his artisan named Gugga. Both the images have been assigned to the 7th or early 8th century by the scholars. The goddess worship in this remote region of Himachal Pradesh had therefore been well established by that time. Slightly later than these we find the images of the goddess from Masrur Rock-cut complex and also from Bisheshwar Mahadev Temple, Bajaura in Kullu. There are numerous other images of the goddess from Himachal Pradesh both in stone as well as metal and some of them may be datable to quite an early period.

Finally coming to the oral traditions about the existence and worship of the Goddess in various parts of Himachal Pradesh, we shall first take note of various traditions and then analyse them on the
principle of history. Starting with the region of Kangra, the temple of Vajreśvarī Devī is said to have been built by king Suśarman who was ruling over Nagarkot at the time of the great Mahābhārata war. The temple continued to be under worship ever since despite several external attacks by barbarians and Muslim invaders. At least from the beginning of the 11th century its history is well-known when Mahmud Ghazni invaded Nagarkot in 1009 AD, desecrated the temple and took away immense wealth from there. The history of Jvalāmukhī is likewise recorded in tradition to hoary past, though popularly it was Akbar who visited the temple and offered a golden umbrella to the goddess. But his court historian Abul Fazl clearly records in the Ain-i-Akbarī that the temple was very old and since times immemorial devotees (infidels) have been visiting the shrine where flames emanate from the earth, again indicating to ancient period.

We have already made a note of the Lakshṇā Devī Temple at Bharmaur and Śakti Devī Temple at Chatrari in Chamba. There is no special story or tradition attached to them that may have come to scholarly notice. The temple of Champāvatī at Chamba is said to have been erected for the princess Champāvatī, the daughter of the king Sāhilavarman. If it is so, it goes back to the early medieval period, without having any outside element in it.

The Hiḍimbā Temple at Manali is sometimes associated with the demoness Hiḍimbā whom the Mahābhārata hero Bhīma had secretly married during the days of Pāṇḍavas’ exile. He converted her to main stream of social life and had a son named Ghaṭotkacha from her. Though the story is contained in the great Epic, there is no way
to trace the antiquity of the temple or the story in the region beyond the medieval period. The other temple of Sandhyā-Gāyatrī is no doubt quite old but no tradition is associated with it.

Coming to the Shimla District, the oldest shrine is at Hat Koti, that goes back to early medieval period of 7th-8th century. The Mahishāsuramardinī called Hāṭeśvarī over here is considered to be the local goddess, who did not come from outside. However, there is a tradition in the Chanshil area of Rohru Tehsil, where an old abandoned temple is located near the village of Kharshali. It is claimed by local people that the goddess migrated from there to Hat Koti. Bhūmikālī at Sarahan, according to a tradition prevalent in Kinnaur, used to be visited by the goddess Chandike of Kothī in Kinnaur. The latter belongs to Kinnaur from the very beginning, when she settled there after killing all the demons. There are many such stories associated with various goddess temples in Himachal Pradesh but the essence of all of them remains the Purānic story – the goddess being the destroyer of the demons. A careful study has also brought to fore the fact that in oral tradition there is no reference to the migration of the goddess from anywhere outside Himachal Pradesh.

From the combined testimony of the literary, archaeological and art evidence and the oral tradition it appears that like elsewhere in India the cult of Mother Goddess developed in Himachal Pradesh and got deeply entrenched in the state by the Purānic period in the early centuries of the Christian era. The association of Śakti or Devī with Himalaya mountain naturally indicates its popularity in the hill state
that kept on growing in the early medieval period when royal patronage like that of Meruvarman of Chamba and Katoch rulers of Kangra liberally donated to the temples and patronised the Goddess. Thereafter the tradition of Goddess worship was further strengthened in medieval times in spite of several invasions by Muslim bigots the worship of Devi continued to gain popularity both amongst royalty and masses.
Notes & References:

1. Rg., II. 41. 16.
4. Śāntiparva, 284.
6. Ibid., 576.
7. *Devī Bhāgvata Purāṇa*, VII. 30. 43. 50
   *Kālikā Purāṇa*, Chapter 18.
   *Brahmavaivarata Purāṇa*, IV. 48. 25.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 272 & 275.

39
Jagannath Agrawal, *Inscription of Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, J & K and Adjoining Hilly Tracts*, Delhi, 2001, p. 158, 163. A full description of these images is given in Chapter IV of our work.