CHAPTER – III

DEVĪ TEMPLES IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

The entire state of Himachal Pradesh it dotted with numerous temples dedicated to various gods and goddesses. This has earned the name Devabhūmi for the state, meaning the land of gods, that appears to be literally true. The number of temples dedicated to goddess amongst these is fairly large and equally distributed throughout Himachal Pradesh. Amongst the most prominent ones are those of Hāṭeśvarī at Hatkoti and Bhīmākālī at Sarahan in Shimla District, Lakshaṇā Devī at Brahmaur, Śakti Devī at Chattrarhi, Vajreśvarī Devī and Champāvatī at Chamba in Chamba District, Sandhyā-Gayatrī at Jagatsukh and Hīḍimbā Devī at Manali in Kullu District, Kōṭhī Devī or Chandaṅke at Kothi in Kinnaur, Markulā Devī at Udaipur in Lahul-Spiti, Vajreśvarī Devī at Kangra, Jvālāmukhī at Jwalaji in Kangra District, Chintapurni near Bharwain in Una District and Nainā Devī in Bilaspur District. Amongst others, which generally fall outside the chronological perview of this study and are of local importance are temples of Sharāikoṭī, Hāṭu, Girigaṅgā, Deolārī Maṅi and Tārā Devī in Shimla District, Shūlinī Devī in Solan District, Prashara Rishi Lake in Mandi District, Chāmūṇḍā Devī in Kangra District, Haripur Mata in Sirmaur District and Bhīmākālī, Sapani and Bhīmākālī at Kamru Fort in Kinnaur and Ambika Devī at Nirmand in Kullu. Besides these
there are numerous temples dedicated to goddess in her various forms located at numerous towns and villages throughout Himachal Pradesh which are deeply revered by the local people. It clearly establishes the popularity of Śākta temples in Himachal Pradesh through the ages.

Despite the existence of such a large number of Devī shrines in Himachal Pradesh it is extremely difficult to trace the origin, antiquity and development of the goddess shrines. We shall make an attempt in this direction with the help of literary and archaeological sources, though the question of architecture of the important temples shall be covered in the next chapter.

Alexander Cunningham has recorded a tradition that the fort and temple at Kangra was originally built by Rājā Suśarman Chandra at the time of Mahābhārata war. However, we have no evidence to support this claim. The great Epic though talks of the existence of temples in various contexts but none is specific to the region of Himachal Pradesh, much less to Kangra. Likewise the Rāmāyaṇa also refers to the existence of temples as early as 6th century B.C., the date assigned to the composition of this Mahākāvyya by Vālmīki but it does not specify anything about temples in Himachal Pradesh. The literature of the pre-epic age i.e. the Vedic and post-Vedic age upto the Sūtras is of no help on this count. Actually the entire literary data upto the Gupta period is absolutely silent on the subject. A small ray of light may come from the Pratimāṇiṭaka written by the celebrated dramatist Bhāsa, assigned to c. 2nd century B.C. It was brought to notice by S. V. Sohoni, who pointed out a reference in the third Act of the drama, when discussing the coins of the Audumbaras. It
describes the journey of Bharata from Kekaya to Ayodhya after the news of the death of Daśaratha reached him. In the valleys of Kullu and Beas, before he reached Ayodhya, he was looking for some resting place and came upon a building that looked like a temple, but was surprised to note that the emblem of the presiding deity was missing, when he reached near the building. The reference brings two things to fore. One that temples existed in the region in the pre-Christian centuries and the second that they were expected to have emblems, may be in the form of a flag-staff, of the presiding deity in front of them. No other literary reference for this early period is available.

There are two inscriptions in Brāhmī and Kharoshṭhī from Kanihāra near Dharmasala in Kangra District datable to 1st century B.C.³ The identical inscriptions refer to the construction of an ārāma either by or named after Krishṇa yaśasa. Cunningham thought they refer to some Buddhist monastery. However, the inscriptions by themselves show no such thing. An ārāma can be a garden or resting place also. There is an equal possibility that it refers to some shrine because Krishṇa is definitely a Brahmanical name. like the Nārāyaṇa Vāṭikā of Nagari, near Chittor in Rajasthan,⁴ this too may be a Vaishnava religious place. However, the information is too scanty to say anything definitely.

The numismatic evidence available from the tribal coins of Himachal Pradesh has thrown some welcome light on the antiquity of temples in the region, if not specifically on the goddess temples. In this respect the coins of Audumbaras are the most important. They

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were a well-known tribe who occupied the land from Beas to the right side of the Ravi in Himachal and adjoining area of Punjab plains. A large number of their coins have been discovered from Kangra and Jwalamukhi as reported by Alexander Cunningham. Their coins have also been found from the area of Pathankot, Nurpur and Gurdaspur. Several scholars like K. K. Dasgupta and Devendra Handa have dealt with them in detail.

On some of these coins of c. 1st century B.C. we find a variety of temple structures depicted along with other symbols. It was first noted by Cunningham who described it as “pyramidal temple of two or three storeys”, or a “pointed roof temple”. R. D. Banerji agreed with the identification of Cunningham. Allan was mistaken when he called the structure as two storeyed domed stūpa. P. L. Gupta thinks that these coins depict that the temple has a decorated or compartmentalized high socle over which stand four pillars on each side, the cantoning corner pillar being common. Over the pillar supported roof is the garland parapet which encloses another pillared storey with a square śikara-roof crowned by a complex finial having two compounds, a ghāṭa topped by a kālaśa. Devendra Handa has further drawn our attention to the character of these temples by the symbols like charka and trident with battle axe shown in front of the temple.

These depictions clearly indicate the existence of fully developed temple architecture as early as 2nd – 1st century B.C. in Himachal Pradesh. Though it is not absolutely certain but from these portrayals on the coins it seems that these structures were made of
wood, indicating that stone temples came very late. The depiction of temple on the Audumbara coins throws no light on the Devī temples in Himachal, for which we may turn to some more numismatic evidence.

Like the Audumbaras, another very important tribe ruling in pre-Christian centuries over large tracts of Himachal Pradesh and Garhwal and Kumaun were the Kunindas. They issued a large number of very beautiful silver and copper coins. Their coins have been discovered from inter alia Jwalamukhi, Tappa Mewa (District Hamirpur), Mandi, Solan, Sirmaur, Rampur Bushahr, Pandoha, Jalog\textsuperscript{13} and Hatkoti\textsuperscript{14} in Shimla District. On the obverse these coins show a deer standing in front of a female figure who has been identified with Lakshmī or Śrī and the deer has been taken as symbol of either Vishnū or Kāmadeva.\textsuperscript{15} The reverse has many symbols, amongst which a six-arched or three arched topped with a chhatra or nandipada or a dhvaja is shown in the centre. This symbol has generally been identified as an arched-hill or a chaitya. None of these identifications give any satisfactory explanation as an umbrella or nandipad atop a chaitya or hill does not make sense. Therefore we think that it represents a temple, a view that is upheld by Devendra Handa.\textsuperscript{16} We shall shortly revert to the evidence of the Kuninda coins.

More recently a hoard of 43 copper coins of the Yaudheyas was discovered from Tehri Garhwal and it was first studied by Ajay Mitra Shastrī, but after his sudden demise, it was published by Devendra Handa.\textsuperscript{17} These coins which have been named as Shaḍānana – Deer type coins depict on obverse the standing figure of
six-headed Kārttikeya. On the reverse amongst several symbols, we have the figure of a standing deer, similar to the one found on the Kuninda coins. But in place of the female deity here the figure of a temple is depicted. One such figure is that of six-arched edifice with a chhatra and svastika on the top. Amongst others as many as thirty nine varieties of temples have been identified by Handa. P. L. Gupta was sceptic of Handa’s identification of so many types of temples but rightly observed that “The reverse motif on the coins reminds us of the obverse motif seen on the coins of the Kunindas. Like the Kuninda coins, here we have a deer or yak standing with some symbols around. Kuninda coins have a female deity standing facing, before the animal; on these coins, she is replaced by an edifice, which is similarly placed in front of the animal. Motif in this changed form draws our attention to the Audumbara coins, where an edifice is shown with a battle-axe trident in front. There it is taken to mean that this emblem of Śiva indicates that the edifice was a Śiva temple. Taking the motifs of the coins of the Kunindas and the Audumbaras, may we not be justified to presume that here too the edifice represents the abode of the female deity, seen on the Kuninda coins”.

Devendra Handa has also agreed with the view of P. L. Gupta. We find that there can be no better explanation of the device on these coins. However, what has not been pointed by Gupta and Handa is the connection of the arched figure on the Kuninda coins with the female goddess shown on the obverse. In the light of the fact that an exactly similar figure of six-arched edifice with an umbrella and svastika has been found on the Yaudheya coins from Garhwal as
a temple, we may take the symbol on the Kuninda coins as that of a temple of the goddess shown on the obverse.\textsuperscript{22}

The numismatic evidence discussed above clearly establishes that the temples of goddess existed in Himachal Pradesh at least as early as 2\textsuperscript{nd} – 1\textsuperscript{st} century B.C. Considering their fully developed form as shown on the coins, their origin may go back considerably.

As for the archaeological evidence, no temples of the pre-Gupta period have been discovered in Himachal Pradesh. There are remains of several stone temples at Nirmamd in the Satluj Valley of Kullu District, though most of them belong to c. 7\textsuperscript{th} century onwards, a few remains of the early Gupta temples do exist on the site. Of particular note is a piece of doorjamb preserved in the Paraśūrāma temple. The figures of the dvārapāla with an attendant on it clearly show the Gupta style of the 4\textsuperscript{th} or early 5\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.\textsuperscript{23} A few more sculptures noted by us on the site indicate the temple activity at the place during the early Gupta period, though it is difficult to say if any goddess temple, including that of Ambika Devī which is prominent at present, existed or not.

The archeological remains in the Kangra fort have also yielded some pieces of pre-Gupta or early-Gupta period. Tradition holds that the Ambikā Devī temple in the Fort is very old, though the antiquity of the present shrine of that goddess does not go back from the 13\textsuperscript{th}-14\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.\textsuperscript{24} There are walls of another broken temple in the Fort with numerous figures on the walls and niches, that may be assigned to circa 10\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.\textsuperscript{25} However, this evidence is
insufficient to arrive at any concrete evidence regarding the existence of the goddess temples here at an early date.

From the post-Gupta period of about 6th-7th century of the Christian era we stand on the firm ground as there is ample art, epigraphical and archaeological evidence to show the existence of the goddess temples in Himachal Pradesh. The beautiful brass images of Lakshana Devi and Śakti Devi at Chamba have inscriptions on their pedestals. They clearly record the installation of these images, crafted by the artisan Gugga, by king Meruvarman who is assigned to circa seventh century A.D.26 Another pedestal inscription on the pedestal of a Vishnu image from Fatehpur in Kangra, slightly earlier in date than the Chamba inscriptions, also refers to the installation of a goddess image27. These images and the inscriptions on their pedestals is clear evidence of the existence and popularity of the goddess temples in Himachal Pradesh.

Hatkoti in Jubbal Tehsil of the Shimla District also has a temple complex with the temple of Hāteśvarī Devī, where an image of Mahishāsuramardini is worshipped under the name of Hāteśvarī. The antiquity of this temple also goes to the 7th-8th century, along with the temples of Chamba. The wooden temples of Lakshana Devī, Vajreśvarī Devī, Śakti Devī and others in the Chamba District have undergone several rounds of renovations. However, all the scholars agree that they originally belong to circa 7th century A.D. It clearly establishes an unbroken tradition of the Devī temples since then to the present day.

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The Markulā Devī temple at Udaipur in Lahul-Spiti, which houses a medieval metal image of the goddess was originally built in the 7th-8th century. Notwithstanding the controversy, whether it was originally a Sūrya, Śiva or Devī temple, the shrine clearly establishes the tradition of the goddess worship and her temples in this remote tribal region.

Two goddess temples in the Kullu District are worthy of note. The Sandhyā-Gāyatrī temple at Jagatsukh near Manali at present is not a shrine of great antiquity. But the archaeological remains on the site clearly indicate towards the existence of a temple as early as 7th century A.D. This fact combined with the tradition is a strong indicator of the existence of a Devī shrine on the spot. The second temple is that of Hidimba Devī in the suburb of Manali in Kullu District. The present shrine may be dated to the fifteenth century on the basis of an inscription in the temple. The original shrine may have existed here much earlier.

The worship of Hidimba as a goddess also brings to fore the popularity of the legends of the Mahābhārata in the area. Hidimba was a demoness who was converted and married to Bhīma, the Pāṇḍava hero of the epic fame. Another temple of this goddess exists in Chamba also. It shall be futile to attempt to trace these temples to the Mahābhārata time as has been done by some scholars. There is no evidence to trace their history to such remote times. It appears that with the increasing popularity of the epic myths, some folk goddesses were named after the epic personalities and were worshipped.
A quite a large number of other goddess temples in Himachal Pradesh, mostly in remote areas like those of Kinnaur have only a tradition to rely upon. A careful analysis of these traditions like that of Kothī Devī or Bhīmākālī at Sarahan or at Kamru castle clearly show that the temples of the goddess were established both out of the belief of the folk in Mother-Goddess that happily mingled with the Purānic traditions. These temples were not imposing edifices and required renovations or reconstruction from time to time. But it resulted in the development of a healthy temple tradition in the land.

The temples which are very popular at present, especially those of Kangra region, like Jwalamukhi, Chintapurni, Vajreśvarī, Naina Devī, etc. may not have a strong archaeological background. But the fact that they are listed as the Śaktipīṭhas in the Purānic-Tantric texts and have strong traditions supported by accounts of the medieval period is enough to indicate their existence and popularity for a long time.
Notes & References:
2 JNSI, IV, pp. 55-57.
3 They were first published by E. C. Bayley in 1854. cf. JASB, XXIII, p. 97. Subsequently A. Cunningham published them in his reports, CASR, v (1872-73) pp. 175-76
5 CASR, V, P. 154 and CASR, PP. 115-117.
6 Tribal History of Ancient India, Calcutta, 1974, P. 44 ff.
7 Tribal Coins of Ancient India, New Delhi, 2007, PP. 25 ff.
9 Numismatic Supplement, XXIII, P. 248.
10 John Allan, BMCAI, PP. 122 ff.
11 Numismatic History of Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, 1988, P. 16.
13 Ibid., PP. 55-56.
14 Personal information from Dr. Abha Malhtra, H. P. University, Shimla, for which we are grateful to her.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., PP. 188 ff.
18 Ibid. P. 193, fig. 22-36.
19 Ibid., P. 191 and 193, figs. 21 and 22.
22 This interpretation has been suggested to us by our supervisor Prof. Ashvini Agrawal.
23 Cf. M. Postel, et.al., Antiquities of Himachal, P. 60, fig. 74. Postel has assigned this piece to the 6th-7th century, which we feel is too late. One may note the soft plasticity of the image, the style of dhota that exactly resembles the one found on the lion-slayer type of coins of Chandragupta-II Vikramaditya and the facial expression of the figures.
24 CASR, V (1872-73), P. 163.
25 Ibid., Also see J. Ph. Vogel, ASIAR, 1905-06.
27 Jagannath Agrawal, ibid.
28 For detailed discussion on this point please see Chapter IV.