

Archeological Heritage of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

While one does not find even a single standing classical monument of the pre-Muslim period in the Indo-Gangetic mainland, a number of those may be found in the Himalayan sanctuaries, especially in Himachal Pradesh. To quote a few, mention may be made of the Lakshmi-Narayan temple at Chamba, the ancient Chaurasi temple complex at Bharmaur, where the classical stone temple of Mani Mahesh and the magnificent wooden temple of Lakshana Devi stand. In Kangra, one may see the legendary Kangra Fort, the archaeological site at Chetru and Masrur rock temple. At Bilaspur one may find the submerged ancient temples popping out of the waters of Gobindsagar Lake. In Mandi - the *Paharan ri Kashi* - one may see more than 80 ancient temples and monoliths scattered in every part of the town. At Bajaura, the stone temple of the Vishveshvar Mahadev is a magnificent example of the classical stone temple and at Chaini; one may find the Great Tower built in the traditional style standing sentinel over the Banjar Valley. Similarly, the wooden temple of Markula Devi at Udaipur in Lahul and the ancient temple of Trilokinath at Tunde high above the left bank of Chandrabhaga River may be the eye-catching monuments. In Spiti, one may visit one of the oldest monasteries of Buddhism at Tabo. Down in the Satluj, the fabled Kamru Castle in the ancient village of Kamru near Sangla is a magnificent example of the wood-based architecture and so is the Bhimakali temple at Sarahan. Further downstream along the Satluj at Nirth, one may see one of the few temples dedicated to the Sun god. In the Pabbar Valley, the Hatkoti complex of temples is a good example of the classical stone-based architecture. Besides, enroute downstream, the famous Ashokan Rock Inscription at Kalsi and an ancient *yajnashtala* made on the Vedic parameters at Jagatigram nearby are a must for the visitors.

Himachal Pradesh is one of the very few regions where evidences of the ancient civilisations and cultures, which dominated over the Indian subcontinent and became extinct in the mainland, may still be found in different states of conservation, many of them in their pristine forms. In fact, since the very dawn of civilisation in the subcontinent, people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, cultural strains, religious affiliations and different persuasions have been pouring into it from the northwestern Himalayan

passes. Those aliens, after having dominated over the Indo-Gangetic plains during their heydays, were ousted by the newer and more vigorous people, who followed them. That process of succession led into the migration of weaker groups to the safer sanctuaries in the Himalayan fastness. While those ancient dynasties and cultural groups, after having played their innings in the mainland, passed out of existence along with the material evidences of their culture under various factors, the radial influences of their culture in the Himalayan interiors have been able to survive, sometimes intact. Therefore, while one does not find even a single standing classical monument of the pre-Muslim period in the Indo-Gangetic mainland, a number of them may be found in the Himalayan sanctuaries, especially in Himachal Pradesh. The reason for that paradox may not be far to seek. While, the religious edifices became the wholesale targets of the iconoclastic frenzies in the mainland and the central Himalayan region of Uttarakhand, those in the Himalayan interiors, especially in Himachal Pradesh, escaped plunder. Therefore, Himachal Pradesh can proudly boast of being a paradise for the antiquarians, archaeologists, historians and the curious visitors.

According to the provisional figures of 2001 Census, there are as many as 26526 places of public worship in Himachal Pradesh. These include the religious places of all faiths. The number might have considerably swelled up by now, because under the euphoria of 'marketing faith' many so-called temples are mushrooming day in and day out almost everywhere in the Pradesh, especially on the roadsides accident sites. Nevertheless, most of the ancient edifices of popular faith are the wooden temples devoted to the autochthonous gods and goddesses in the inner parts of Pradesh. Interestingly, the wooden temples of this region are among the oldest and finest edifices not only in the Himalayan region, but also in India. The extant wooden doorframe of the garbha-grih and the carved wooden pillars of Dakshanishvar Mahadev temple at Nirmand followed by the wooden temple of Lakshana Devi at Brahmaur (Chamba) are the oldest one of all the standing temples in Himachal Pradesh. Unfortunately, the excellent wooden temple of Dakshanishvar Mahadev that I explored in the sixties of last century has now become a target of the pious vandalism. Even so, Nirmand can boast of being the confirmed oldest inhabited village in the entire Himalayan region, as may be known from the famous Nirmand Copperplate of CE 612-613 issued by the Mahasamant and Maharaj Samudra Sen. This village still has 12 ancient living temples crying for proper conservation. Besides, the interior of Kurpan Valley has still conserved umpteen archaeological wealth in its womb for the archaeologists to explore and discover. In fact, Himachal Pradesh is a living repository of the artistic Buddhist monasteries, ageless wooden temples, magnificent monolith and structural stone temples and vernacular citadels and massive forts of the hoary past.

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It may not be possible to contain and discuss all that tangible wealth in the present presentation. Even so, attempt has been made in this paper to present with the nostalgic refrain a kaleidoscopic view of the archaeological wealth that this Pradesh possesses for the benefit of conscientious scholars. In this paper, I propose to conduct a hurried tour of only the few selected and typical monuments so that all types of the ancient monuments are represented, but shall also touch in a cursory manner others too. However, this does not mean that the other monuments excluded from our discussion are not as important. In fact, the other monuments are also as ancient, artistic and magnificent as the ones that we propose to discuss. Therefore, despite their archaeological, historical and artistic worth, we may not be able to devote as much time as required to do justice with those. The monuments that we intend to talk about here have been arranged in such a manner that one desirous of visiting these edifices of the popular faith may perform their parikrama.

Thus, while enjoying the antiquity and artistic grandeur of these sacred places, we may also gain the merit of pilgrimage – a ‘religious tourism’; that is how ‘pilgrimage’ is defined in the parlance of market culture. Starting from the western-end of the Pradesh, we enter Chamba – the ten-century old town, where the Lakshmi Narayan temple and many other fascinating temples of that and later periods exist. A visit to the Bhuri Singh Museum in the town may also be a very rewarding experience for the archaeologists and lovers of Pahari miniatures. From Chamba, we may move on to the fascinating Brahmaur – the capital of ancient Brahmputr kingdom – to see the ancient Chaurasi temple complex, where the classical stone temple of Mani Mahesh and the magnificent wooden temple of Lakshana Devi stand. Once there were 84 (chaurasi) mini shrines dedicated to the Eighty Four Siddhas in this complex. I had also seen some of those at site during one of my earliest in the sixties of last century, but now those are hardly to be seen. While returning, a detour to the ancient wooden temple of Shiv Shakti at Chitrari shall also be very rewarding. The brass cast images of Lakshana Devi and Shakti Devi, made by one Guga for his patron Meruvarman in about CE 680 – 700 are among the finest images in the world. Then, we may follow the Chamba-Khajiyar-Dalhausie route to get out of Chamba district.

However, a visit en route to the Khaji Nag temple at Khajiyar, the so-called ‘mini Switzerland’ may be a must. Next, we may proceed on a lateral route through Jot and Chwari to the land of legendary Trigarta in Kangra district and visit the hoary Kangra Fort, which still stands stoically in the ruinous state at the confluence of Manjhi (or Patal Ganga) and Ban-Ganga rivers. Though much weathered, it still maintains its grandeur and majesty. In the site museum outside the fort, several interesting relics discovered in and around the Fort are on the display. However, on the way to Kangra Fort, we may take a short detour to Dharmasala to see the newly established Museum of Kangra Art and the archaeological site at Chetru, where an ancient Buddhist chaitya still stands in a very ruinous state. Besides, a visit to

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the famous Bhavan, one of the most revered pilgrimage destinations in the Naya Kangra, may be a must. In the premises of Bhavan, the ancient lithic relics of the devastated earlier edifices are also preserved. These may be of great interest for the scholars and researchers. Besides the Kangra Fort, the Bhavan suffered the most in the violent Kangra Earthquake that shook large geographical area of the outer Himalayan region between the Ravi and Satluj on the 4th April of CE 1905.

From Kangra Fort, we may visit the unique monolith temple-complex at Masrur, one of the most important monolith monuments in the country. Interestingly, besides the Masrur rock temple, there are two other monolith temples in the Himalayan region. One of that, known as the Ek-hathiya Dwal exists near Almora in Uttarakhand and the other is the Ardhnarishvar monolith that the author discovered about a decade back at the confluence of Beas and Suketi rivers at Mandi. The Ardhnarishvar monolith of about CE 8th century may be the oldest such relic in the Himalayan region. From Masrur, we may proceed to Tira Sujanpur via Hamirpur. Tira Sujanpur had been the capital of Kangra kingdom under Sansar Chand II, when the Sikhs ousted him from his stronghold at the Kangra Fort. The panchayatan temple of Narbadeshvar that he built at this place is a magnificent specimen of the provincial Mughal architecture in the Himalayan interiors. The murals in this temple are some of the finest works of Pahari painting. On the top of mountain nearby, Sansar Chand built a large palace (now in desolate ruins) and a temple, known as the Sansar Chandeshvar temple. In that temple, he personified himself as Shiv and his beloved Nokhu Gadden as Parvati. From Tira Sujanpur, across the Beas River, we reach the famous stone temple of Vaidyanath at Kiragram, now called Baijnath after the name of presiding deity of the temple. From the inscription, known as the Baijnath Prashasti, it is revealed that the lingam of Vaidyanath already existed here in a shelter-less and exposed state prior to the construction of this temple by Manyuk and Ahuk in CE 1204. This temple might have originally been a panchayatan temple, as may be evidenced from the ruins around. At Baijnath, we may say adieu to Kangra district. A short detour to Bilaspur may provide a glimpse of the doomed ancient temples of Old Bilaspur town, now submerged in the depth of Govindsagar Lake. Of those ancient stone temples, the Shanmukhevar (Kartikey) temple near the Sandu Maidan and one at Auhar were the oldest in Bilaspur, but a finest of the Bilaspur stone temples was the Rangnath temple. The colossal and magnificent dishupal images of that temple are on display in the Himachal State Museum at Shimla. It is learnt that efforts are on way now to rehabilitate what has now been left of those beleaguered and badly eroded temples. After returning from Baijnath and following the Pathankot Mandi route, we reach the Paharan ri Kashi or the Chhoti Kashi, which is how the town of Mandi is popularly known for its highest concentration of temples. Among those, the Trilokinath temple is regarded the earliest and the important one, but the author recently discovered a small monolith Ardhnarishvar temple of 8th century at the confluence of Beas and Sukati rivers. This temple may take the antiquity of temple-building activity at Mandi

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to the much remoter past. We may gainfully spend a couple of days in this town to visit the ancient stone temples. Besides that, a visit to the legendary Buddhist monastery at nearby Rewalsar may be very rewarding. This lake-side town is associated with the mystic exploits of Guru Padmasambhav. From Mandi, we may take Mandi-Kataula-Bajaura road via Dulchi Pass, but, en route, take a detour to the magnificent lakeside wooden temple of Parashar Rishi atop a mountain peak. It was originally a Nag temple, which under the Brahminical influence became rechristened as the Parashar Rishi temple. On reaching Bajaura, we are in Kullu district. At Bajaura, we must visit the magnificent stone temple of the Vishveshvar Mahadev. The site around this temple is replete with the fragmented relics of many other temples that might have existed here in the unknown past. From Bajaura, following the downstream course of Beas River, we reach Aut, from where we cross the Beas River and follow a lateral road to the head of Tirthan Valley. There, above Banjar is the Great Tower at Chaini, standing sentinel over the valley. Although, it lost its upper two storeys to the Kangra Earthquake of CE 1905, yet it still is the tallest standing castle in the entire Himalayan region. A short distance downhill stands the wooden temple of Shringi Rishi. Back from Chaini to Aut, following the upstream course of Beas, we reach the fabled Hidimba Devi temple at Dhungri above Manali. However, on the way, we must visit Nagar Castle, Roerich Art Gallery and the Tripura Sundari temple at Naggar, temples at Thawa, Sandhta-Gayatri temple at Jagatsukh, Docha Mocha and other temples. Kullu or Kooloot has been the most ancient kingdom, as known from the Kooloot coins of the CE 1st -2nd century. It had a long tradition of the Buddhist activity, about which Hiuen-Tsang has written at length in his Si-yu-li. Proceeding from Manali, across the Rohtang-la (3955 meters above MSL) we are in the Chandrabhaga Valley of Lahul & Spiti district. Following the downstream course of Chandrabhaga, we reach Udaipur to see the ancient wooden temple of Markula Devi and its fabulous woodcarving. On our way back from Udaipur, we may take a detour to the ancient temple of Trilokinath at Tunde high above the left bank of Chandrabhaga River. Following the upstream course of Chandrabhaga and then of the Chandra River, we cross the Kunzam-la (4550 meters above MSL) and enter into the region where neither the land nor the sky is like that of ours. In the Spiti basin, we are face to face with the stark and raw nature at the rarefied heights of the above 3660 metres. In some of the most inhospitable conditions on the earth, only faith can sustain life here. That may explain why the people here have been assiduously following Buddhism since the very early times. The living temples and monasteries of the Himalayan (Tibetan) Buddhism in Spiti are among the oldest in the world. We have selected two of them - the pompous monastery at Ki and the so-called Ajanta of Himalay - the monastery at Tabo, appropriately the Tabo chos-khor. The Tabo chos-khor, built in CE 996, may be the oldest living monument of the Himalayan (Tibetan) Buddhism in the world. Then, following the downstream course of Spiti River, we drive on the fabled Hindustan Tibet Road (HT Road) along the downstream course of the turbulent Satluj and enter Kinnaur district. Here, at the lakeside village of

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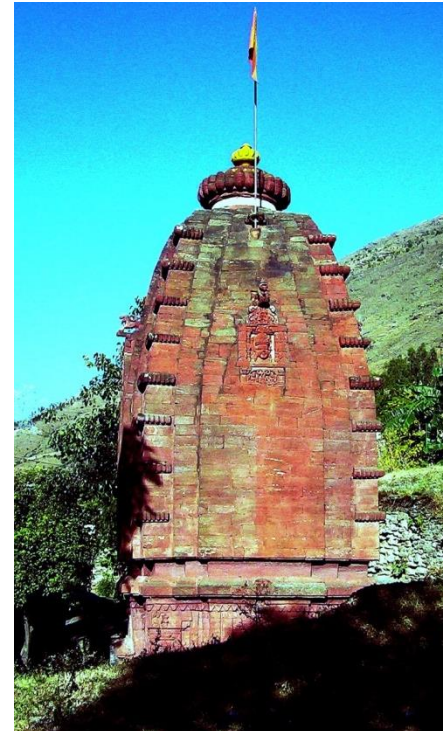
Nako, a large and ancient Buddhist choskhor complex and several small temples exist. One of them is of the Padmsambhav's association, having his footmarks on a sacred rock. Down in the Satluj, there stands the fabled Kamru Castle in the ancient village of Kamru near Sangla. This castle is one of the magnificent specimens of the Pahari architecture with its timber bonded dry stone masonry, locally called the katth-kuni wall. The Bushahr kingdom was founded at this castle.



Vaishnavi image at Hatkoti



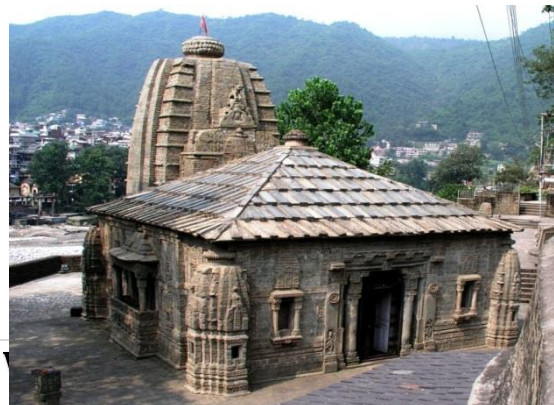
Sun image in Sun Temple.



Sun Temple, Nirth



Vishveshvar Mahadev Temple at Bajaura



Trilokinath. Mandi



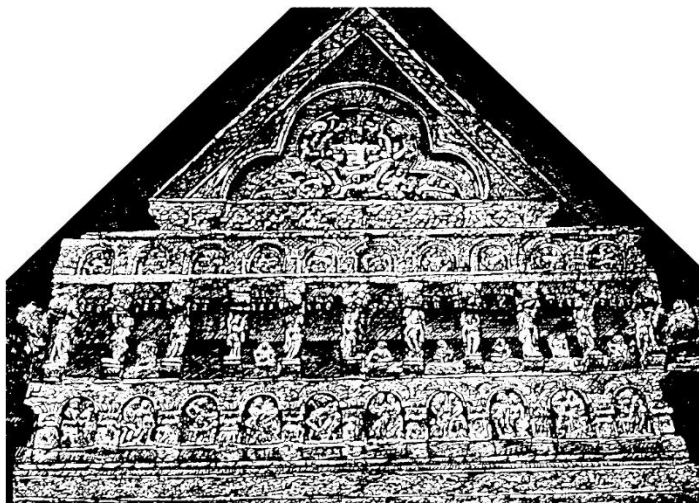
Ornate Interior of Tarana Temple



Narbadeshvar Temple at Tira-Sujanpur



Sapani Castle, Kinnaur



Ornate Pediment of Lakshana Devi Temple



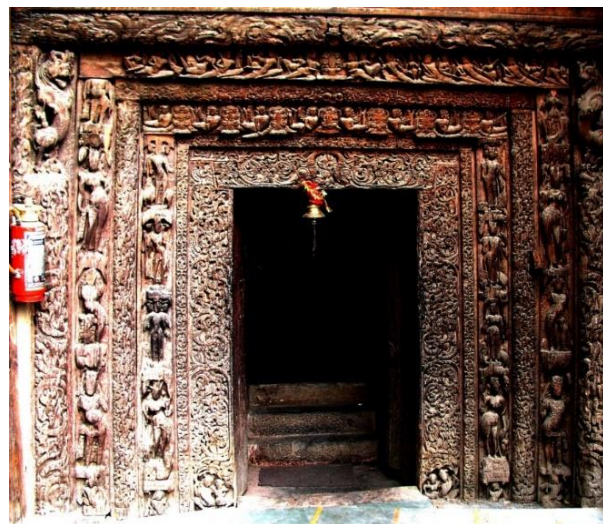
Bronze image of Shakti,
Chitrari



Dishapals in the Rangnath Temp.
Bilaspur (now in St Mus.)



Lakshana bronze
image



Main door of Lakshana Devi temple at
Bharmaur



Niche image in Lakshami-Narayan Complex, Chamba



Lakshami-Narayan Temple, Chamba

Further, following the downstream course of Satluj, we are in Shimla district, where the palatial stone and wooden temple of Bhimakali stands at Sarahan. This is one of the magnificent examples of the wooden temple architecture having katth-kuni four walls. The woodcarving and the metal repoussé work in this temple-complex are a tribute to the local artisanship. Following the Satluj downhill, we reach Rampur, the capital town of the defunct Bushahr kingdom. There are some good temples at Rampur, but not very old.

Here, the richly carved wooden ceiling of the Ayodhyath temple is worth seeing. A few kilometers downstream of Rampur, across the Satluj, a road bifurcates to Nirmand, about which we have already noted, but additionally it may be noted that this village is also known for its narmedh ceremony, i.e., the ritual human sacrifice, popularly known as the bhunda. The last of such ceremony, which I also witnessed, was held on the 12th -13th September 1981. However, in place of a man, a goat was slung on the rope. Back from Nirmand, we proceed downwards on the HT road and reach Nirth, where the ancient stone temple of Surya Narayan exists. It is one of very few living Sun temples in the country. The temple has interesting stone images of different periods in and around it. From Nirth, we follow the same fabled HT Road and reach Theog. At Theog, we leave the HT Road and turn leftwards to reach Hatkoti, the last destination of our itinerary. Here, we pay homage to the goddess Vajreshwari Devi for the successful consummation of our pilgrimage to the temples, forts and monasteries of Himachal Pradesh. From Hatkoti, we have two options to move out. One option is to reach Chakrata and thence to Dehradun or Hurbartpur. In case we opt for Hurbartpur, then, on the way, we can also see the famous Ashokan Rock Inscription at Kalsi and an ancient yajnasala made on the Vedic parameters at Jagatigram nearby.

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The other option is to return to Theog and reach Shimla. That completes our journey to the nostalgic past, during which period these temples and other monuments were created under various socio-cultural and religious conditions. I hope, you must have enjoyed reliving the past and journeying with me to the different sacred and age-old monuments of the popular faith in Himachal Pradesh that have given to it a coveted cognomen of Dev Bhumi. However, the archaeology does not end up only with these standing monuments, much more lies underground for the archaeologists to uncover.

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