

Bridging Great and Little Traditions: Gīhn Nāga as a Symbol of Western Himalayan Religious Synthesis

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Abstract

This paper explores the mythological, historical, and cultural dimensions of the worship of Gīhn Nāga. This deity revered across the Mandi and Suket regions of Himachal Pradesh. Regarded as an incarnation of Śeṣanāga and a manifestation of the Pāṇḍava spirit, Gīhn Nāga represents the synthesis of the Epic, and regional western Himalayan religious folk traditions. Through the study of local legends, temple traditions, and ritual practices, this research paper highlights how the deity embodies both pan-Indian mythic elements with unique local identities. The paper also examines Gīhn Nāga's role in shaping regional heritage, sacred geography, and the continuity of Nāga worship as a vital strand of Himachal's cultural identity till today.

Keywords: Gīhn Nāga, Nāga tradition, Mandi, Suket, Pāṇḍavas, Mahāsū Devta, Himalayan culture.

1. Introduction

The Western Himalayan region of Himachal Pradesh has long been a repository of ancient cultural and religious traditions. Among its numerous folk deities (*devtās*), the Nāgas occupy a pre-eminent position, revered as protectors, healers, rain-granting god, and upholders of moral order.¹ Within this pantheon, Gīhn Nāga stands out as a significant deity worshipped in both Mandi and Suket. The deity's identity as a *Pāṇḍava-rūpī* Nāga — incarnation of the Pāṇḍavas — illustrates a rare fusion of great tradition with local religious expression. This study investigates the theological roots, ritual practices, and socio-cultural relevance of Gīhanāga worship, drawing from oral traditions, temple histories, and scriptural associations.

Historical and Cultural Background

The region historically known as Suket— mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* as Sukut — was the land of sage Śukadeva, son of Vyāsa.² The inhabitants of this area have preserved a composite cultural identity blending Śaiva, Śākta, and Nāga elements. The continuity of these traditions reveals the deep imprint of great religion adapted to local cosmologies. The Nāga cult, in particular, symbolizes the transformation of primordial serpent symbolism into protective divine forms that govern natural and social order.

Prominent Nāga deities of the region include Māhūnāga, Kajaunīnāga, Pokhīnāga, Dhamūnīnāga, and Gīhanāga. Each deity is believed to represent a heroic or divine incarnation from the *Mahābhārata*: Māhūn Nāga as Karṇa, Kajaunī Nāga as Kaśyapa, Pokhī Nāga as Bhīṣma, Dhamūnī Naga as Arjuna,³ and

Gīhanāga as Śeṣanāga, the cosmic serpent of Lord Viṣṇu. These identifications highlight the syncretic manner in which local religious consciousness incorporated pan-Indian mythic archetypes.

Temples and Sacred Geography

The worship of Gīhanāga is centered in five principal shrines: Thanār, Bhūlāh, Khanyārī (Chindi), Bhundal, and Sarhī near Pāṅgaṇa.⁴ Collectively, these temples represent the five Pāṅḍava brothers. The chief shrine at Raigarh, near Karsōg, is believed to be the original seat *mūla-sthān* of the deity's manifestation. Located at an altitude of about 6,000 feet, it becomes accessible only twice a year for the Kalayā ritual — a sacred offering of rice and ghee prepared under strict ritual purity, observed in silence and celibacy.⁵

Each temple houses an ornately carved wooden *ratha* (chariot) bearing a metal-masked image of the deity. During annual festivals, these chariots are carried in ceremonial processions, accompanied by folk hymns and rhythmic movements, signifying the living presence of the divine among devotees.⁶

Mythological and Theological Dimensions

The Nāgas, as per epic⁷ and Purāṇic⁸ accounts, are semi-divine beings descended from Kaśyapa and Kadru. While ancient texts often portray them as beings of the underworld, Himachali folk traditions regard them as guardians of fertility, rainfall, and moral law.⁹ Gīhanāga is considered a *sāttvika* (benevolent yet strict) deity, who enforces discipline in his worshippers. Loud music, impurity, or irreverence is strictly prohibited during rituals. Instead of drums, a metallic instrument called *kāhulī* is used to invoke the deity.¹⁰

Such ritual precision reflects the older Tantric and ascetic traditions of the Himalayas, where the Nāga cult functioned as a bridge between nature worship and formalized Hindu practice.

Association with the Pāṅḍavas

The rulers of Mandi and Suket states were claimed themselves as the descendants of the Pāṅḍavas family of *Mahābhārata* period as equally claimed by the other ruling families of the Western Himalaya. The ruling classes also impacted to locals to follow the great traditions of faith and beliefs. Local belief identifies Gīhanāga as the collective manifestation of the five Pāṅḍavas. Various sites across Suket and Mandi — including Karsōg (ancient Chakranagarī), Laiḍeshvar, and Pāṅgaṇa — are associated with their exile. The term Pāṅgaṇa itself is interpreted as Pāṅḍava-aṅganā, or 'the courtyard of the Pāṅḍavas.'¹¹

Each of the five Gīhanāga temples corresponds to one brother:

1. Yudhiṣṭhira – Thanār
2. Sahadeva – Bhūlāh
3. Nakula – Khanyārī
4. Arjuna – Sarhī
5. Bhīma – Bhundal

The symbolic distribution of these shrines over two territories — Mandi and Suket — underscore a mythic unification of the two regions under the spiritual sovereignty of Gīhanāga.

Etymology and Oral Traditions

According to the priests and gurus of Gīhanāga of Dhanar and Bansad in Shankardehra the name Gīhanāga is traditionally derived from *gīhūṃ* (wheat). Wheat is called 'Gihu' in the local dialect. According to legend; the deity once took refuge in a granary filled with wheat during a celestial battle. It is mandatory to sow wheat on this land every year. Geehnag's main mask is kept in wheat. When the main mask is attached to the chariot, it is taken out with a vessel filled with wheat as an offering. Hence, a specific field known as *Nāgā-rī-Kochhaṛī* continues to be cultivated annually in his honor.¹² Another legend narrates that Gīhanāga once cured a Rajput couple of a deadly disease at Khanyārī, after which his worship spread widely.

His dominion area is spread in erstwhile Suket and Mandi and Saraj. He is a recognized deity in the villages of Shankardehra, Bansod, Bhutah, Banar Kandidhar, Kalain, Saryog, Rikki, Sanoi, Janaid, Tikkari Jaugi Chanaut etc. In the Karsog assembly constituency, Sarheenaag is revered in Khanyari, Sarhi, Katal, Natu, Bhyana, Kudi, Luchadhar, Sui Tana Pangna and Sanog etc. Under the Nachan assembly constituency, the areas of Mundan Kurwadi, Khaniudi, Bihuli, Kansar, Godan, Bithri, Shalog, Pannikar, Hiuntinala and Dagiti are under the dominion of Gīhanāga.¹³

Khanyari, temple is dedicated to Nakula, the Pandava brother. A popular belief regarding the appearance of Gīhanāga in Khanyari (Khanairi) is prevalent. According to this belief, about five hundred years ago, a Banaig Rajput couple from the Ramgarh region lived at Nagadhar Dhaldu, near Khanyari in Udaipur. The Banaigs contracted an incurable and contagious disease. Neighbors feared coming into contact with them. To ward off the infection, people from nearby villages would cook food for the Bigas and hang it on trees near their homes.¹⁴

In those days, due to the lack of treatment for an incurable infectious disease, the ailing Banaig tribe invoked Gīhanāga. Hearing their call, Gīhanāga appeared to them in a dream. Gīhn Nāga said, "I reside in the pond (Fandair) near the Chindi-Bayanal Guard road from Nagadhar. I have come to this area in response to your desperate plea cure this incurable and infectious disease." Through the power of the deity, the Banaig couple recovered completely. The grateful couple installed the self-manifested idol of deity from the pond (Fandair) at a place called Nagadhar in Thaltu, and built a small temple (Dehra). After installed the idol in the temple, the Brahmins of Chindi took the responsibility of worshipping the deity. The Brahmins of Chindi perform the ritual of *Kalaya* (applying rice, milk, and ghee) on the stone idol of the Naga during the main Sankrantis of the month of Jyeshtha and Ashwin). These Brahmins also act as representatives (Gur) of. In the condition of impurity Brahmins from the neighboring village of Bakhras take over the charge of the puja.¹⁵

Inter-Deity Relations and Cultural Synthesis

Gīhanāga shares a ritual and historical relationship with Mahāsū Devta, another powerful regional deity. Archival Tankarī manuscripts preserved in the Bakhrās temple record details of their joint worship and priestly lineages. The stylistic similarities of their metal masks and ritual paraphernalia suggest parallel developments within the same cultural matrix. This interconnection reflects the broader process of integration among Himachal's folk pantheon, where deities transcend territorial boundaries to embody shared cosmological principles.¹⁶

Conclusion

The cult of Gīhanāga encapsulates the enduring vitality of Nāga worship in the western Himalayas. As a symbol of both local identity and mythic continuity, the deity bridges great trati with folk religiosity. His association with the Pāṇḍavas transforms epic narrative into living ritual, sustaining collective memory and regional unity. Through such traditions, Himachal Pradesh continues to preserve a dynamic cultural dialogue between myth, landscape, and devotion.

Notes and References

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