

# Hill Cultures



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Volume 5: 2

(ISSN 2454-9495)

July 2023

## **GOLJU DEVTA and NANDA DEVI: Two Prominent Local Deities of Kumaun and Garhwal**

*\*Dr. Anil K. Joshi*

Uttarakhand comprises two regions -- Kumaun in the east and Garhwal in the west. The majority of the local population here is either *Shaiv* (devotees of Lord Shiva) or *Shaakt* (having faith in Goddess representing *Shakti*). Most of the Shiva temples are located on the banks of rivers, big or small, especially confluences, whereas the Devi temples are almost invariably perched atop the mountain peaks (there may be rare exceptions though). Vaishnavism is less prevalent, the famous shrine of Badrinath notwithstanding.

Like other hill states of India, Kumaun and Garhwal, both, have their fair share of local deities, who are propitiated – often annually – for different reasons. *Bhumiya* is the god of land and every village has a small temple devoted to it. *Chaumu* is the god of domestic animals and cattle. Villagers are also known to worship the spirits called *Mashan*. It is not uncommon to see people frequenting the cremation grounds for this purpose. Quite often hysterical behaviour is considered to be the effect of some evil spirit, and services of certain experts in witchcraft are sought to get rid of that malady. Some spirits have names too, like *Haru*, *Gangnath* and *Bholenath* and a unique ritual called *Jaagar* is held to ward off their evil effects. It is a very elaborate community event held usually in the night and involves beating of large bronze plates

with sticks in such a furious manner that at times the rhythm created by it, accompanied by incantations in a loud chorus, sends people into a trance, and the person affected by the spirit is considered to be cured. The priests performing it belong to a particular community and are suitably rewarded for their labours.

### **Golu Devta or Goljyu**

This is the most popular deity in entire Kumaun, and is revered by people from all walks of life. Images of a sword wielding cavalier astride a horse found all over Kumaun give the impression that he could well have been a warring chieftain looked upon by the people as their saviour. According to a legend, his mother Kalinka was the queen of the king Jhal Rai. When he was born, her co-wives exchanged him with a stone and left him in the river nearby. He was saved by a fisherman and at the age of eight returned riding a wooden horse. He took the horse to the pond where the seven queens of the king were taking bath and made it drink the water. When the queens laughed at him, he said: if a woman can give birth to a stone, a man can ride a wooden horse. The king came to know of scheming by his wives and punished them and made Golu the king. In time, the boy came to be known for his acts of justice and became popular as Golu Devta. Another legend connects him to Katyuri Kings who ruled Kumaon or Kurmanchal as it was then known from 7th-12th CE. He was either a son or a general, or maybe both, of one of the Katyuri Kings. Some scholars connect him to the Chand dynasty that ruled after the Katyuris dynasty sometime in 12th CE. In this story, he is the brave warrior who dies fighting a battle.

Like so many other deities Goljyu has different incarnations. At some places he is seen in the form of Lord Shiva as *Gaur Bhairav*, while his brother Kalva Devta is in the form of *Bhairava* and Garh Devi is in the form of *Shakti*. He is also propitiated as the key deity (*Ishta/Kula Devata*) in many villages. In Chamoli district in adjoining Garhwal, devotees worship Goljyu from three to nine days. Goljyu is offered purified butter, milk, curd along with *halwa* and *poori*. He is also offered white cloth, white *pagari* (*headgear*) and white shawl.

Goljyu is considered to be a saviour of the masses and dispenser of justice and commands more devotion than the major icons in the pantheon of Hindu faith. The original shrine dedicated to Goljyu is located at Champawat, which was the seat of royalty under Chand dynasty. The deity was also known as Gorill in that area and hence the flat ground that houses

the temple is called Gorill Chaur. Another major temple is at a place called Chitai on the outskirts of Almora located on the Almora-Pithoragarh highway. A small structure, situated on a spur within a thicket of deodar and oak trees, it is famous for a unique practice. There are many more temples of Goljyu spread across Kumaun, which, though not as popular as the above mentioned ones, have their own set of devotees- Ghorakhal (district Nainital), Tarikhet and Chamarkhan (district Almora), to name a few. It may not be out of place to mention that this practice of placing applications with bells is not confined to Goljyu alone. One finds them in a temple in a remote place called Kotgari (district Pithoragarh) dedicated to Kokila Devi, hailed as a Goddess of Justice.

Any person facing a problem writes an application to Golu devata and ties it along with a brass bell inside the temple premises, wherever any space is available. Be it a family feud, property dispute, interview for a job, transfer or promotion, daughter's marriage or praying for some terminally ill dear one, Goljyu is the ultimate saviour. Sometimes, a bell is presented after the wishes are granted. Since, with the passage of time, the entire compound is choc a bloc with bells of all sizes, one can see the bells protruding out of the walls in different directions. As the gentle breeze blows, the bells, big and small, chime in such unison that one can hear them from miles away. Such is the clout of this shrine that even non-religious persons make it a point to drop in whenever they happen to pass that way.

The deity is regarded as the final Court of Appeal. Some applications are even typed on stamp papers issued by the revenue department. It is said that even the stiff upper lipped British officers touring the area would take a bow. George William Traill, the second commissioner of Kumaun with the headquarters at Almora, was hit by snow blindness during his trans-Himalayan forays. At the insistence of his native advisors he went to the Goljyu temple at Chitai and was cured of his ailment. So much so that Sir Henry Ramsay, who was the Commissioner, or, say, the uncrowned King of Kumaon for 26 years and, as a devout Christian, was responsible for the advent and spread of missionary activity in the hills, had to accept the primacy of Goljyu.

### **Cult of Nanda Devi**

Amid the plethora of goddesses worshipped in the hills, Nanda Devi stands out. Regarded as a consort of Lord Shiva she happened to be the presiding deity of the Chand rulers of Kumaun, who lorded over the region almost all through the last millennium. Presumably, the deity gets her name from the mighty Himalayan peak of the same name and which happens to be the highest peak of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand and the second highest peak in India. Since it is visible from Almora, dominating the sky line, the cult of Nanda Devi as a deity appears to have come into reckoning after the Chand rulers shifted their capital from Champawat to Almora, most probably during the reign of Baj Bahadur Chand (Circa 1638-1678) as borne out by a couple of inscriptions.

The Chand rulers built a grand temple dedicated to Nanda Devi at Almora which stands majestically till date and is a major landmark of the town. Subsequently, temples dedicated to Nanda Devi came up at many places. In Nainital, where the deity is known as Naina Devi, a beautiful temple dedicated to her on the western end of the lake was built by a wealthy local banker, Amar Nath Shah, late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Every year on the eighth day of the lunar fortnight of the month of Ashwin, Nandashtami is celebrated in Kumaun as well as in Garhwal. Huge fairs marked by song and dance are held in Almora, Champawat, Nainital, Ranikhet and some other places too. Colourful images of Nanda and her sister Sunanda carved out of banana tree stumps are placed in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, and on the third day they are carried out with much fanfare in a procession and finally submerged in the nearest water body. The most elaborate fairs are held at Almora and Nainital. Even today the descendants of the erstwhile Chand rulers come to Almora to preside over the proceedings.

Nanda Devi is worshipped in neighbouring Garhwal too, where at some places she is also known as Tara Devi. Every twelve years a long trek called *Nanda Raj Jat* is undertaken in her honour, where she is carried in a garishly decorated palanquin covered with an ornamented canopy from a village called Nauti to Homkund, a huge glacial lake at the base of the Himalayas. This is symbolic of Parvati leaving her maternal home and is described as a Himalayan Mahakumbh. The elaborate ritual involves a four horned ram (found very rarely) adorned and embellished and accompanied by musicians and dancers which leads the way on the long and treacherous journey across two districts along the narrow precipices and high alpine pastures. As the procession marches ahead, thousands of villagers keep thronging in,

bathing in freezing waters of the lakes like Roopkund, falling on the way, before reaching Homkund. After depositing the deity there, the multitude returns to Nauti. The entire journey of over 280 kilometres takes 19 days.

Of late, largely through media exposure and increased influx of tourists, festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Durga Puja have also found their way up the hills. However, they have not been able to diminish the influence of Goljyu and Nanda devi among the masses.

-----

### **About the Author**

\*Dr. Anil Joshi is Professor (Retired), Department of History, Dean, Faculty of Arts, SSJ University, Almora 263601, Uttarakhand