

**TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE OF WESTERN HIMALAYAN REGION:  
WOODEN TEMPLES- A CASE STUDY OF CHAMBA, KINNAUR  
AND SHIMLA HILLS (HIMACHAL PRADESH)**

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**ABSTRACT**

The pantheistic developed in the Western Himalayan region as a collective psychological response of the people to the incomprehensible entities of nature, kept them always overwhelmed and tormented. Many temples were built in different styles and material and throughout Himachal through peaceful avocation of its people. The temples of Himachal vary across regions namely Kinnaur, Chamba and Shimla hills. The speciality of Himachal temples, especially in Kinnaur, Chamba and Shimla hills is the extensive use of wood and stone. A wooden temple built in the heart of village is generally known as bhandar, as against the debra-the root place in the Jungle, where the original symbol of the deity is enshrined. The term bhandar calls for a bit of explanation, because the term in the context of the Western Himalayan wooden temples, not only means a village-temple, but also a repository for the village community. In it, besides the temple treasures, the people have been depositing their own valuable and the common wealth of the community. In the interior of the Western Himalayan regions, good structural stone that can be dressed and chiselled into blocks, is rarely available, and all that is quarried is mica-schist. It can only be used flat and laid without mortar. It is, thus, unsuitable for structural purpose. The ingenious local artisans, therefore, devised way to use this stone for building purpose by combining it with wood. The wall construction technique thus perfected came to be known popularly as kath-kuni i.e., all with wooden corner. In the paper, the classification of the wooden temples on their elevations-peculiarities in Chamba, Kinnaur and Shimla Hills of Himachal Pradesh has been attempted.

**Introduction**

Himachal, known as Dev Bhumi as known lies in the heart of the Western Himalayas. This fascinatingly mysterious has centuries old culture. In itself the region may seem insignificant, thinly populated and located in one of the most interior regions of the Western Himalayas between Indian plains and Kashmir. On the one hand, Himachal maintained ancient indigenous

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traditions and on the other it adopted with great fidelity the highly developed cultural influence from the northern plains and semi-cultural inflow from the north and north east. Temples made in wood are peculiar to this region where the myriad patterns of woodwork on different elements of these temples is striking, wood figure either as the primary raw material or in combination with stone. The most elementary form of hill architecture is represented by the old temples scattered everywhere all along the mountain slopes and in the valley. These are indigenous styles and peculiar to the hill. The temple architecture is wholly of wood. The walls of these temples are raised on the horizontal wooden framework called Cheols. In the well-built structure, the wood is very carefully arranged, extending over the whole length of the wall. A beam lies on the outside and another one on the inside, the space in between is filled with stones. On these rest the next set of beams alternately. The structure grows in the form of brackets over bracket. This style of construction is known as Khasha Style, using the same primary simple building materials—stone and wood. Temple is built in the centre of the village or on the upper slopes. The common plane of the temple is square, but occasionally, it is rectangular too.

### **Temple Architecture: The Evolutionary Process**

The pantheistic developed in the Western Himalayan region as a collective psychological response of the people to the incomprehensible entities of nature, kept them always overwhelmed and tormented. The autochthonous demonic deities—the nature spirits of this region have been of the terrific disposition, to be feared, awed and occasionally propitiated by offering sacrifices to them. The people chose to keep them at a safe distance on the mountain-tops, in the forlorn caves, under or atop the old and mighty trees or somewhere near the mountain cliffs. They never cherish the idea to settle them within the community or in their close vicinity. In order to keep those destructive deities in good humour, the people would propitiate and appease them occasionally or only at the time of exigency by offering numerous sacrifices. For rest of the time they were supposed to fend for themselves. There was thus hardly any reason to erect temples and shrines for those ill-disposed deities. When did, therefore, the idea of erecting the temples to such demonic deities develop in the Western Himalayan interior, may be anybody's guess. For, we do not have any material evidence about the existence of any temple dedicated to an autochthonous deity prior to the late medieval times, although wooden temple built in the classical style for the goddess Lakshana Devi stood at Bharmaur in Chamba district as early as the seventh-eighth century.<sup>55</sup> It may possibly be the oldest surviving wooden temple along with that of Dakshineswar Mahadev at Nirmand in which most of the decorative architectural elements of that age may be found intact, although some of them have been displaced from their original positions. Literary and folk traditions are also silent on this issue. It was probably with the spread of Mahayanic Buddhist faith among the masses in the Western Himalayan interiors through the vigorous popularisation campaign of the Buddhist monks under the zealous patronage of Kanishka (78-101 A.D.) that temples came to be built in the Khashadesh for the classical Buddhist deities. In all probability, no structural temple existed for the native deity in the Western Himalayan region up to the seventh century A.D. That fact is well established from

the records of Hiuen-Tsang (629-644 A.D.in India), who extensively visited some parts of the Western Himalayan region. Hieun-Tsang also speaks of the twenty Sangharamas, besides the fifteen Deva temples in Kiu-lu-to (Kulut). The Deva temples, as the very designation suggests, should have been none but the Shiva temples. How the earliest wooden temples of this region might have looked like, can well be reconstructed by pursuing the original structural forms of the four surviving classical wooden temples of this region-The lakshana Devi temple at Bharmour, Shiva-Shakti (or Adi-Shakti) temple at Chitrari, Markula temple at Udaipur and Dakshineshwar Mahadeva temple at Nirmand. Because all these temples have undergone repeated modifications and changes since their original construction,hence what they now appear is completely discordant with what they originally had been.

The wooden temple architecture of the early period, of which the temples of Lakshana Devi, Shiva-Shakti, Markula Devi and Dakshineshwar Mahadeva are but a few notable examples, can't conveniently be explained as the distant products of the indigenous classical movements in art and architecture. Similarly, neither can the semi-classical wooden temples of Kullu valley and the outer Saraj area be declared as the combination of the classical and folk styles, nor can the later wooden temples be summarily considered as the product of the folk art. What is passed as a classical form today is but a sophisticated, skilful and polished version of what had been in the popular usage through the centuries past. We may put it the other way round to explain the folk-art as the simplified and stylised residuum of the anterior classical tradition. Either of the two inferences may hold valid under different conditions, so none of these can be applied as a thumb-rule. Nevertheless, it is the product of latter situation which helps us with the indispensable clues for history, where the formal literary and archaeological evidences may be wanting. In the study of wooden temples of this region, we have to be face to face with the latter situation too often. It is, therefore, essential that we free ourselves from the obsession of such terms as-'classical art' and 'folk art' and delve a bit deeper to find their roots. The mainstay of the wooden temple architecture of the Western Himalayan region of later non-classical period has, except for a few examples in Mandi and Kullu district, been the popular enterprise of the common village folk living in the interiors. A critical study of the decorative devices in these temples is, therefore, important. For, these devices may lead us to solve numerous riddles of the socio-cultural history of the people of this region which so far has remained an enigma to the researchers and scholars. The hill-folk of this region, although unmindful of their privation, have always been deficient in material resources. This state has imbued them with the innate faculty to improvise within what the bountiful nature has made available to them and what they have produced has the capacity to set standards in their own right for the rest of the world to emulate in many ways.

## Typology of Temples

It is an irony that the magnificent and ageless wooden temples in the interiors of the Western Himalayan region, though rich in the architectural grandeur and artistic contents, have so far remained little known and least studied. Despite the archaeological, architectural and artistic wealth preserved in them through generations of the devotional enterprise in the form of

structural embellishments, sculptural architecture and independent free-standing objects of faith and artistry, those temples have unfortunately escaped notice of the serious and conscientious researchers and scholars, with the exception of a few. If the wooden temples, and the extant material objects of faith and culture vouchsafed in them, are studied in the context of socio-cultural history and ethnography of this region, these have the potentiality to set right most of the misconceived notions and ideas about this region. Such study can pave way for a proper and objective understanding of the religious, social, cultural and economic facets of this region. Because, as opposed to the stone temples, which are largely the works of alien or refugee craftsmen, done under the feudal patronage, the wooden temples are the sacred edifices of popular faith, raised through the corporate and collective endeavour by the ‘sons of mountain,’ the Paharis, themselves. In the entire Western Himalayan region, Kullu district and the contiguous part of Mandi district is the area, where the relationship between the deity and his subject is most intimate and indispensable for the survival of village community-life. In fact, from womb to tomb, no activity of life-domestic, social or agrarian-is possible without the indulgence, and sometimes active participation of the deity in this area. It is mainly due to this reason that all wooden temple-types found in the rest of the Western Himalayan region are found concentrated in Kullu district. Because of the predominating influence of the village-deities over the life and culture of the people, Kullu valley has aptly been called as the Valley of Gods or the Deva-Bhumi. The natural setting of this valley amidst the towering mountains and snow ranges has further added to it an aura of serenity and sanctity.

### **Classification**

Captain A.F.P.Harcourt, who remained Assistant commissioner of Kullu, then a sub-division of Kangra district from 1869 to 1871, was the first person to take note of the architectural grandeur of the temples in the main Kullu valley in his pioneering work *The Himalayan Districts of Kooloo, Lahul and Spiti* (London, 1871). He did not include the outer Saraj area in his classification of the temples of Kullu, which he classified in four architectural categories as: 1<sup>st</sup>- The pyramidal carved stone temple which is also common in India. 2<sup>nd</sup>- The rectangular stone and wood temple, furnished with a pent-roof and varandah. 3<sup>rd</sup>- The rectangular stone and wood temple provided pagoda fashion with successive wooden roofs, one on top of the other. 4<sup>th</sup>- The small rectangular temple with a pent-roof- this being probably but a variety of the edifices of the second order above quoted. Chetwode stuck more or less to the Classification of the temples of Kullu done by Harcourt, because “his Classification of the four different architectural types of Kullu temples can hardly be improved upon,” she records. She further provisionally identified temple style of Kullu and Shimla region in the Satluj valley as the ‘Sutlej Valley style,’ which she described as the ‘fascinating cross-breed of type II and IV’ corresponding to the classification of Harcourt. O.C.Handa studied in detail the wooden temple over several years of field-work and seven distinctive types of the wooden temples have been identified by him on their elevational characteristics and roof-forms, giving due regard to the classification done by the earlier

scholars. Seven elevation types, mainly based on the forms of their roof which are present in Chamba, Kinnaur and Shimla Hills and almost all parts of Himachal Pradesh:-

1. Gable –Roofed Temples
2. Composite-RoofedTemples.
3. Tower Temples.
4. Multi-Tiered Pyramidal Temples
5. Canopied Composite-Roofed
6. Circular-Roofed Temples
7. Composite-Temples



**Gable-Roofed Temples**



The rectangularly laid out single-storeyed temple covered with gable roof (called chhepato in the interiors of Shimla and Kinnaur), with ridge running parallel to the longer walls, is the simplest temple-structure of this region. Such temples are mostly devoted to the Chamunda and Naga deities and are concentrated in the north-western part of Chamba district. Temples of this type are also found in Kullu valley but there are not many of these. No temple of gable-roofed type has been noticed elsewhere in the Western Himalayan region, although the layout and elevation of this type is very common in the dwelling houses in the rural area of this region. The only essential difference between the gable-roofed temple and a dwelling house of this type is the location of the main entrance. In the temple of this type, the main entrance is essentially under

the gable, but in the dwelling house it is the longer wall under the edge-line of roof. The temples of this type are mostly situated in the high altitudinal areas, which normally receive heavy snowfall. It is for this reason that most of the temples of this type, particularly in Pangi valley of the Chamba district have high-pitched gable roof. The notable examples of gable-roofed temples in Chamba district are: Dehant (Deh) Naga temple at Kilar, Chamunda Devi temple at Mindhala, Sheetala Devi temple at Luj, Chamunda Devi temple at Devi-Kothi. Chamunda Devi temple at Chamba, Lakshana Devi temple at Bharmaur.



### Composite-Roofed Temples



While defining the type 4<sup>th</sup> temple in his classification of the temples Harcourt defined this type to be “the small rectangular temple with a pent-roof,” Penlope Chetwode also stuck to Harcourt’s classification, only after interchanging its order between type 3 and 4. She observed “that type 3: the chalet style temple is found all over the Hindu districts of Himachal Pradesh in a variety of designs...The great majority are rectangular in plan and have pent-roof covered with either stone tiles or shingles.” These pioneer-scholars and all those who based their work on them used the term ‘pent-roof’ uniformly to define different types of roofs. They were probably not aware of the distinction between the two architectural terms-‘the gable-roofed’ temple and the ‘pent-roofed’. Pure pent-roofed temples in the Western Himalayan region are rare and not more than a couple of them may be found in the entire region. Because the low-pitched roof of such temple gives on un-temple like appearance, which might not have been pleased the religio-aesthetic sensibility of the people. In conformity with the mountainous ambience, with the towering peaks, which they adore as the abode of gods, a temple of popular faith was also required to be with a roof soaring higher into the sky.

There is another very vital traditional religious point involved in deciding the type of roof over a temple. The ridgepole, locally called bador, lada or kurad at different places, forms a very important part of a temple structure. Especially for the temples of the native gods and goddesses, it is considered the most important and sacred element of the structure. Beginning with the selection of tree for the purpose to the placement of kurad on the top of the roof, innumerable rituals and sacraments are involved and many do's and don'ts have to be observed. Many goats are sacrificed, not only to the main deity of the temple, but also for other minor godlings who might have felt offended by inadvertent lapses of the people in the process. The climax of the whole exercise is the placement or replacement of the kurad in position. It may involve slaughtering of goats and performance of an elaborate puja. This rite in the Brahmanical terminology is called Shikhar Puja. In Hamal valley of Chopal in Shimla district, monkeys carved in stone, are also placed atop the kurad. Such an important member shall not be able to show its grace on the pent-roof, where its ends shall have to be chopped off and joined with the hips. Obviously pent-roof is the least choice for a temple. It may possibly be one of the reason that the pure pent-roof temples are very rare. The pent-type roofing mostly covers the veranda or the passage around the sanctum and the sanctum usually is covered with the gable type. At times a low vertical clearance is left between the upper gable portion and the lower pent portion, which imparts a feeling of height even to a smaller structure. The notable composite-roofed temples are:- The Shiva-Shakti (Adi Shakti) temple at Chitrari in Chamba district, Pandava temple a Masali, Naga temple at Naldehra, Chikhadeshwar debra at Janog, Ratal Devata temple at Sarog and Mahasu Devata temple at Kashaini, all in Shimla district, the new Usha temple at Nichar and Vishnu temple at Urni, both in Kinnaur district.

### **TowerTemples.**



The temples characterised by their towering superstructures, covered with pent or pent-n-gable composite roofs have been defined as the Tower Temples. Except for Chamba district, these temples are found in the entire interior of Himachal Pradesh only. The tower-type temple was, strictly speaking, not meant to be a religious edifice but a multipurpose building, mainly conceived as a defensive structure in which the Clan deity (kul-devta) or the community deity (gram-devta) was accorded the highest position on the top-most floor. The lower floors were apportioned for the storage of food grains, water, weapons and musical instruments and for garrisoning. It was because of its importance as a defensive structure, that such towering

structure came to be built on the strategic location in the heart of a village. It could, thus, ensure surveillance of the whole terrain around. The people of village could also seek immediate protection in it from the aggressors and attack them effectively from above by hurling missiles. No permanent staircase or steps were provided to reach the entrance, located at least a floor higher above the surrounding ground. Such tower temples have essentially been the citadels of the theocratic oligarchy. These defensive castles, the relics of the medieval past, served a very crucial role in the olden days, when the interiors of this region were divided into village-level theocratic oligarchies. The inter-village skirmishes were too frequent and the people fought each other on such issues that may appear trifling today. In that primitive set-up, those were mostly the clashes of the community ego. The folklores of this region is full of such innumerable sanguinary episodes. These tower temples are the mute evidences of the turbulent past. Since, the theocratic institutions have been gradually losing their relevance and effectiveness with the establishment of the statutory administrative system. The castle temples at Gondhala in Lahul, Chaini castle in Kullu, Kamru and Sapani castles in Kinnaur and Baneshwar Devta castle temple in Shimla district are the example in this regard. The lay out parameter for the tower-type temple structures is identical. All have quadratic, generally the square plan. The internal arrangement for rooms and other utilities may vary according to the obtaining local expediencies. However, the ground floor is generally occupied by a single large room, which in the ancient past, when the castle was a functional structure, might have served as an assembly hall. Now, when these tall castles have lost their strategic and defensive role, and are being used only as the religious edifices, an ornamented projected balcony is provided in front of the main entrance to the tower and a regular and permanent staircase provided, as at the Kamru castle in Kinnaur. The roof provided over these tall structures is mostly of the pent-n-gable composite type. However the gable roofs may also be seen over some tower temples as at Chaini. It however is not the original roof-type but a later improvisation. The pent-n-gable roof has been made complex and ornamented at many places conforming to the local aesthetic tradition. The roofs of Kamru castle in Sangla valley of Kinnaur and Bhimakali temple are the examples in this regard. The other notable example of towering temple-structure found in Shimla and Kinnaur hills are Gondhala Castle in Chandra valley, Banar Devata temple at Pujarli, Durga Temple at Kiyari, Thainag Devata temple at Harwani, Bijat Devata temple at Sarahan, Rairmool Devi temple at Kadharan, Baindra Devta temple at Bachhonch and Castle temple of Joginis at Chaini.

### MultiTieredPyramidalTemples



These temples occupy a very prominent place among the wooden temples of Himachal Pradesh, and some of the finest examples of artistic merit may be found in these temples. This type of temple is essentially a single-storey structure provided with pyramidal roof laid in multi-tiers. In many temples of this type the bottom-most tier of the roof is laid in a concave form so that the hip-ends have a graceful upward swing like the outstretched wings of a swan. Such temple is normally provided with a circular canopy on the top over a Kalash, locally called paru or anda is established. At times the clearance in between the tiers in these temples is deliberately kept higher which elaborate carved wood-work in between ostensibly on aesthetic consideration in order to give loftier dimension to the structure. It is probably because of the misunderstanding about such ostentation, that this type of temple has been defined as the ‘pagoda’ almost by all scholars, who have worked on this region and they have linked the origin of this temple-type to the ‘pagodas’ of Nepal. This has created enormous confusion about the origin of this unique temple architectural-type with numerous religio-cultural and social ramifications. There is indeed, no evidence in the recorded history of this region of any direct and significant socio-cultural and political contact of this region with Nepal before the Gorkha war. On the contrary, the eastward flow of the Khasha racio-cultural influences including the serpent-cult, is a fact of history. The wooden temples of this type still existed in the Chamba area at Bharmour, Chitrari and Markul (Udaipur) long time back which fact is clearly proved from the original layout pattern of the standing temples at those sites.



**Canopied Composite-Roofed Temples**



The canopied composite-roofed temples developed organically as a subtle response of the indigenous talent to the challenge of recreating the classical stone temples in the regional diction, essentially as the nerve-centres of popular faith, eastwards in the Satluj-Tons watershed area. The heartland of the temple of this type is the outer Saraj area of Kullu district. It is only in this rugged mountainous tract that no wooden temple of the other elevational type is found. The temple of this type are thus widely spread in a vast mountainous area, covering Karsog and Thunag tehsils of Mandi district, outer Saraj sub-division of Kullu district, lower Kinnaur district and Shimla district in Himachal Pradesh. No temple of this type has been noted in the main Beas valley and the area west of it. This type is, thus, the architectural peculiarity of the eastern half of the Western Himalayan region in the manner, the 'gable-roofed' and the 'multi-tiered pyramidal' elevational types have been typical to the western part. While, the general characteristics of the temples in these areas conform to the 'canopied composite-roofed' elevation style, in detail there may be local peculiarities in the treatment of different structural components. What is significant about the 'canopied composite-roofed' wooden temples is the fact that most of these stand at such hallowed places where in the unknown remote past classical shikharakara stone temples existed and now lay in desolate ruins. In such cases the possibility of using the substructure of the ancient stone temples for the new wooden one can't be ruled out. Since these temples were largely raised on the existing sub-structure it was essential that the new wooden temples were erected on the sturdy framework of the wooden plinth-beams placed over the existing stone substructures. These beams may be seen extended beyond the edges of the old substructures at the nodal point not only to ensure firm lap-joints but also to increase the floor area and to provide space for pradakshina-path around the cella, contrary to the classical canon, but to satisfy the popular urge. That is how the 'canopied composite-roofed wooden temple-type' came into being. This temple-type may be identified as a single-storey structure with oblong layout, standing on

the cantilevered wooden frame-work on the plinth having composite roofing with an independent roof surmounted by a canopy raised over the sanctum. A crude and completely unrelated example of recreating such stone temple in wood may also be the Markula Devi temple at Udaipur and Khaji Naga temple at Khajiyar in Chamba. Some of the typical example of canopied composite-roofed temple are Mahadeva temple at Behna, Naga Devata temple at Pangri, Bhawani temple at Manan, Koteshwar Mahadeva temple at Koti and Gauri-Shankar temple at Mamel.



### **CircularRoofedTemples**

Just by way of exception, Durga Temple at SharaiKoti in District Shimla is only one temple built in the traditional style, but in circular layout. Since the architectural-style and the elevation characteristics of this temple do not fit in any of the other types identified so far, it is considered necessary to define it as a 'circular-roofed' temple. Located on a mountain peak, called Daranghati, on the old Hindustan-Tibet mule road, above village Sharai-Koti, this temple is now known as the Durga temple. The dilapidated temple, with dark and dingy interior, was a congenial nocturnal habitat for the wild bears. The local people of the nearby villages used to visit it only once in a year during the Navaratri. The temple structure, in its present much modified condition, was built through the public participation under the supervision of Shri Gopi Chand Bisht in 1983. New images were also installed in the temple. Now there are in all seven images in the temple. The temple is planned in circular layout. The walls, the outer circular one and the internal, are all made of rubble stones, laid dry. Over these structural walls, the roof is laid in three tiers. The lower one is a circular and extends over the whole temple. Over that what may be described as mandap, a composite roof is provided on the raised walls. The gable roof over the sanctum is independently raised. Slate has been used as the roof-covering material. Within the temple premises, there are six small wells dug into the living rock. It is believed that the Goddess has made them for supplying water to the six deities, including herself. The other five are; the deity of Kasoh, the Bashahru Devata, the Kilbalu Devta, the deity of Deothi and one for the people of the Beshtu clan of Kuh village, who saved the Goddess from the wild bears, according to a local tradition.



### Composite Temples

The term 'Composite temple' has been devised to define the type of temple structure in which the standing mulapasada structure of the ancient classical stone temple and the later wooden super-structural contraption have been combined together to formalise a unique temple-type. In that composition, the classical and the vernacular structural components may be found inter fused to formalise an imposing structure. Once there existed a good number of classical stone temples in the interior of this region in a wide area belonging to the post-Gupta architectural style. The definite circumstances and reasons responsible for the damage and destruction of those ancient temples may not be known. Nevertheless, it may be inferred from the circumstantial evidences that many of them suffered gradual decay and disintegration under the vagaries of nature and human neglect. That vicious process might have started since the twelfth century, when the central power in the mainland collapsed. In the prevailing uncertain political condition in the mainland, neither the patronage of the kings, wealthy people and merchants nor the expertise of the stone-artisans from the mainland could be mustered for the restoration and maintenance of the existing stone temples in the interiors. Those temples made of mica-schist stone were in fact, too fragile to withstand the weathering effects of the elements without proper expert support and upkeep. On the other hand, the local artisans and masons were not adept enough to repair or restore those stone structures, built by the stone-masons from the mainland. Consequently, most of them crumbled down. Later, the wooden temples of the 'canopied composite-roofed' or the 'multi-tiered pyramidal' types came to be built on the sites of those ancient temples. However, a few of them which escaped serious damage to their superstructures were protected in an ingenious manner by local craftsmen by utilising the construction material which they have been using since ages i.e. the wood. Such temples that were either smaller in size or in bad state of conservation were completely encased in the wooden structures built around and over them. That way the ancient weathered stone structures were completely insulated against the vagaries of elements. The temple of Dundi Devi at Dhabas in Chopal tehsil and to a lesser extent the Vajreshwari temple at Hatkoti are the examples in this regard.

**Conclusion** The temple of the chief deity, in almost all parts of the Western Himalayas, is the centre of the village. The architecture and the style of its construction is therefore, the most sublime one that the culture possesses. The difference between the construction of temples and residential complexes in hills has increased beyond recognition. Where residential structures have almost entirely adopted concrete, iron-steel and cement, temple construction style and material have hardly undergone any discernible change. The sanctity of building temples has been maintained strictly despite a sea change in almost every other construction over the last few decades. A field of study still open to researchers is the impart of Muslim and Christian architecture on hill temples. Though the rigidity of temple architecture would not allow much deviation but such cultural inroads are unavoidable over centuries.

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