

Goga: A Folk Deity and Its Relevance in the Agrarian Community

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Abstract

Animal worship is an important part of Indian culture. Significant role of animals in Indian culture is due to its latitudinal location. India lies in the tropical region thus it is rich in natural resources and also in bio diversity. People of Indian subcontinent used to worship various elements of nature such as rivers, mountains, forest, animals etc. since the early stage of the evolution of human civilization. Animals are always revered and respected here and snake is one of those. Snake worship in different forms in India is also existing since very early times. During the 10-11th centuries in India, people started worshipping Goga as a belief that this deity is a protector deity and he does not only protect his followers from snakes but also cures them from snakebite. This research paper deals with the importance of animal worship in India and it will focus on the relevance of Goga cult in the agrarian community. How the belief of Goga became a cult over the period? How this cult is still traveling from one region to another? Why the British consider Goga as adalit deity or a deity of lower classes? This research paper will try to summarize all these issues related to the Goga cult to understand this cult more comprehensively.

Introduction

Nature worship in India is existent since the Harappan Civilization, the earliest known human civilization on Indian subcontinent and one of the oldest civilizations of the world. In the Vedic period too, nature and its components were sought for benediction. Even today we worship nature in different forms and many deities are associated with nature. For instance,

Chhathpooja, very popular in Bihar and its neighboring states, is dedicated to nature worship.ⁱ Various festivals and fairs in India are associated with agriculture and agrarian practices. During the Mahājanpada period (6th BCE), India witnessed social and religious reform movement which attributed birth of many sects and philosophies. Buddhism and Jainism were two major philosophies which were very popular among the people. Both, Buddhism as well as Jainism gave special importance to animals. For instance, in Buddhism, all the major events of Lord Buddha are associated with animal symbols such as pregnancy (elephant), birth (bull), leaving home or *mahābhinishkraman* (horse) etc. In Jainism, among twenty-four tirthankaras, six of them is associated with animal symbols such as - Rishabhdev (bull), Ajitnath (elephant), Sambhav (horse), Shantinath (deer), Parshavnath (snake), Mahavir (lion). In *MatsyaPurana* there is reference of ten avatars (incarnation) of Lord Vishnu. Interestingly, four out of those are associated with various animals like *Matsya* (fish), *Kuram* (tortoise), *Vrah* (boar) and *Narsingh* (the man lion).

Since India lies in the tropical region and heavy rainfall is common here, it is not surprising that Indians worship natural resources like water, forest, animals, etc. Animal worship is very common here and almost all the animals (domestic as well as wild) are significant in Indian culture, where snake is not an exception. Snake is considered to be a dangerous creature for human being but it does not mean that this creature is worthless. Snake is helpful too, because snakes consume rats and mice which damage crops and grains. It is also an important fact that if a snake is seen anywhere, this indicates the presence of food and water nearby. In Christianity, a *serpent is symbolized as life, healing, and fertility but mostly as an evil power.*ⁱⁱ On the other hand, in *India, especially in Hindu mythology*, a serpent is considered to be divine. Almost all the preeminent Hindu deities have a *snake affix to them. Lord Shiva has a blue neck due to the poison of a giant venomous snake and he has a snake around his neck as an ornament. Lord Vishnu rests on a snake, Lord Ganesha adorns a snake around the waist, Lord Kartikeya has a snake beneath his foot and so on. In the Ramayana, during the war between Rāvan and Ram, both brothers (Ram and Laxman) were tied with the snakes. A story in the Mahabharata tells that when the Pandavas were preparing or constructing their capital in Indraprastha, they needed land and then they burnt the whole forest and all the snakes also*

in the forest lost their lives. Although all these signs are significant and have some intrinsic meaning, these instances show that Indian mythology is full of snake worship.

Snake worship is popular in Indian mythology. There are numerous references in varied texts like Purānas, Mahābhārata, Rāmāyana, etc. In Hindu texts, there are stories of *Nāglok*, *Nāgmani*, *Ichchhadharināg*, etc. *NagPanchami* is celebrated, according to the lunar calendar, on the fifth day of *Shukla Paksha*, bright half, of the month of *Shravan* or *Sawan*, July or August of Solar month, in various parts of India which are associated with the *nāg* deity. It is believed that if we worship snake on this day then the snake will not harm but protect us. In legends and Purānas like *Vishnupurāna*, references of *Sheshnag* (bed of Lord Vishnu), *Takshaknāg*, etc. show that in Indian culture snake or snake worship has a significant role. Snake is revered throughout India in various forms and associated with different gods. *Goga* or *Guggais* one of them.



Image- 1. Worship of snake idols

Goga as a Warrior and a Deity

Goga is a folk deity of northern and western states of India especially Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Gujarat. He is also known as *Gugga*, *Jahar Veer*, *Jaharpir*, *Goga Pir*, *GogaBir*, *GogaRana*, and *Raja Mandlik*. He is a warrior-hero, venerated as a saint and as a 'snake-god'. All the local communities offer reverence to him.

He is known as *Goga* among the Hindus and *Jahar pir* among the Muslims. The Qaimkhani Muslims claim themselves as his descendant and regard him as a *pir* (saint).ⁱⁱⁱ

Goga is very popular in the folklore of Rajasthan for a long period. Historical shreds of evidence can also be found which represent *Goga* as a ruler. He had ruled the small kingdom of Dadrewa (present-day in Sadulpur tehsil of Churu district in Rajasthan) and was contemporary to Prithviraj Chauhan.^{iv} *Goga* was born in Chauhan clan, the then rulers of this region *Jewar Chauhan* and *Queen Bachchal*. His father Jewar was the king of Dadrewa. Queen Bachchal was the daughter of a Rajput ruler Kanwarpala who ruled over Sirsa, present day in Haryana, around 1173 CE. The earlier life of *Goga* was spent in the village of Dadrewa.^v His descendants adopted the name Bachchal after the name of queen Bachchal, *Goga*'s mother. *Goga* was born after the blessing of Guru Gorakhnath. His mother, Rani Bachchal worshipped her guru Gorakhnath for twelve years. Guru Gorakhnath gave her two *Guggal* candies, and hence, the child was named Gugga or *Goga*.^{vi} She distributed another candy to a 'Blue mare' who was pregnant at that time. The horse borne to the mare the 'Blue Horse' that *Goga* rode. The story behind his name as 'Goga' is that Gorakhnath blessed queen Bachchal with *Guggal* and told her that this will help you to have a child who will be named as *Goga*. He will be a great warrior and the devotees will worship him.^{vii}

Goga is remembered as a warrior but there is another belief which states that he has a close association with snakes. When *Goga* took birth, he was lying on a ramp. With the intention to kill *Goga*, Takshak nag, the king of the snake came and caught his neck. *Goga* got angry, caught Takshak nag's neck and swallowed him. The poison of Takshak went in *Goga*'s body and *Goga* becomes the king of snakes. People started worshipping him because he had overcome the snake. It is believed that if a snake bites someone, the chanting of the mantras associated with *Goga* cures undoubtedly the person.



Image-2. Depiction of the life history of JaharVeer Goga Ji

Goga Cult in Festivals and Fairs

Cult of Goga is practiced in various regions of India with some variations in respective folk stories. In Rajasthan, his shrine is called *medi* while in Punjab it is known as *madi*.^{viii} Veneration of Goga starts in Bhadra or Bhado month of the Hindu calendar. On the ninth day of this month, people adore his symbol, a black snake painted on a wall. Worshippers take a fly-flap, known as *chharī* (baton), around the village. Devotees pay reverence to it and offer *churma* (a kind of sweetmeat). It is important to look at the significance of a baton. It helps in protection from the snake. It can be used to hit the snake to keep it distant or to kill him. The Savayians sing devotional songs known as *Pir ke Solle* in his honor to the accompaniment of *deroos* (*damru*, small hand drum). The beating of *deroos* is the exclusive privilege of the Savayian community; others may sing, dance or offer *charhawa* (*Bhog*). It is believed that the spirit of Goga temporarily takes abode in the devotee dancer who lashes himself with a bunch of iron chains. Both, loud music, as well as a stick, are significant here. Loud music keeps snakes away and a stick is helpful in protection from snakes.



Image- 3. Gogamedi Fair 2017



Image- 4. Jaharveer Goga Peer Ji Samadhi- Gogamedi Fair

Grand fairs are held every year at *samādhi sthal* of Goga. It is believed that Goga went into *samādhi* at *Gogamedi*.^{ix} Every year, in the month of *Bhādrapada* or *Bhādo* there is a three-day fair, known as *Goga fair* or *Goga Navmi*, where thousands of devotees gather to pay homage. The fair is held from the ninth day of the *Krishna paksha* (dark half) of *Bhadrapada* to the eleventh day of the dark half. People sing and dance to the beats of drums with multicolored flags called *nishāns* in their hands. The songs and *bhajans* on the life history of Goga are recited accompanied by music played with traditional instruments like *Damru*, *Chimta* (forceps), etc. At his birthplace Dadrewa, the fair goes on over a month.

Devotees from far eastern places of Dadrewa start arriving from the beginning of the auspicious month of *Bhadrapada*. It is common to see people with snakes lying around their necks. According to a folklore in and around Dadrewa, it is believed that if someone picks up even a stick from Johra, it would turn into a snake.^x Devotees of Goga use *bhabhoot* (sacred ash collected from the temple) as a first-aid remedy of snake bite. They believe that this *bhabhoot* will stop spreading poison in the body.



Image- 5. Gathering of people at fair

In Himachal Pradesh, Goga is worshipped because he protects from snakes. GogaZahar Veer Temple in village ThaneekPura, Una district, is the center of his devotees. This village witness a grand festival and an annual fair on GogaNavami dedicated to deity Goga. Devotees carrying a *chhatra* (a wooden umbrella) visit door to door, recite tales of Goga and collect offerings as grains and other commodities from local people. They carry all the collected offerings to the temple. Then the festival of GogaNavmi is celebrated for three days.

Goga is worshipped at various places in Punjab. In the memory of Goga Pir, there is an annual festival organized in the village of Chhapar, Ludhiana. The snake embodiment of Goga is worshipped here. This festival too is celebrated on the fourth day of Bhado. It is said that snakebite has never become the cause of a single death in this region because people are getting blessings of Goga. Other than Chhapar, many villages have shrines of deity Goga.^{xi}

Some sources refer to Goga as a Dalit deity because the majority of devotees of Goga are from lower castes.^{xii} The whole story of Goga is involved in the greatest obscurity. The Goga

also worshiped by the Muslim community and they considered him as a pir. Therefore, he is also known as Goga pir. When R.C. Temple saw the worshipers of Goga who were majorly from the lower classes so, he considered Goga as a deity of lower classes.^{xiii} On the other hand, H. A. Rose in *The Glossary and Tribes and Castes of the Punjab N.W.F.P*, mentions that worshipping of Goga by marginalized people does not mean that he is the deity of the lower class.^{xiv} Goga is worshipped by both, Hindus as well as Muslims and most of the followers are from agrarian community, who, for their own protection from snakes, started worshipping Goga. This is the reason that Goga became more popular in society and Goga worship became a popular cult in north and north western region of India.



Image- 6. Shrine of Goga Pir

After analyzing the Goga cult, certain questions are raised that how Goga became so prevalent among societies and how this cult traveled region to region? Another important question is that how he became a Dalit deity (which has been discussed earlier)? Regarding these questions, two lines of thought are there. The first line of thought postulates that whenever a snake bites someone, he or she worships Goga to cure the pain. Another reason is that he is particularly prevalent among those who engaged in agrarian pursuits, for whom the fear of snakebite is common. Because in the month of *Bhado* or *Bhādrapada* (August-September) farmers and agrarian laborers work in the field for their *Kharif* crops. On the other hand, since these are the months of monsoon and is a rainy season, snakes come out of

their bills as those fills with the rainwater. Thus, the probability of snake bite increases in this time especially for those who work in fields i.e. peasants. People have a belief that Goga will protect them from snakes. So, for their protection from snakes, they start worshipping the Goga. He not only protects from snakebite but also heals people bitten by snakes. This is the reason that the worshipping of Goga became a popular cult in various regions through the ages.

Farmers are not from a particular caste or religion but they are from all the castes and all the religions thus the followers of Goga cannot be categorized as from a particular caste or religion. They are from agrarian class and this is the only thing which is common among them. This agrarian class works in the field and is at high risk of snakebite from which they need protection. Therefore, they worship a God who can protect them from snakes and they can work freely in the field even in the rainy season. Although, in some regions, Goga is worshipped as a Rajput warrior but there too he is remembered as a protector deity and he protects from all the difficulties and fears related to the snake.

The tenets are formidable to go to work for livelihood despite the presence of danger opined by snakes around, which makes them toil at fields. For overcoming the fear, they clinged to the faith in Goga which would save them from snakes, as he is the king of snakes. By the arrival of British, and by observing such reverence – British held Goga as a Dalit deity, which had a pivotal role in modifying the cult of Goga;butit does not mean that he is the deity of the lower class.^{xv}Goga is worshipped by all the classes of the society. Goga is worshipped by Hindus as well as Muslims and most of the followers belong to the agrarian class.Goga as a folk deity of Rajasthan, saw many transitions especially from historical figure to folk hero, and finally, at present, becoming a cult that travels through region to region.

Conclusion

Goga is a regional deity popular in the north and north-west of India. Throughout this region, various festivals and fairs are celebrated, mostly in the rainy season, dedicated to deity Goga. He is worshipped as a warrior and a deity who protects his followers from snakes. His devotees belong to various castes and religions but despite their caste and religion most of them come from agrarian class. Thus, this deity does not represent any particular caste or

religion but the agrarian class. This class needs protection from snake especially in the rainy season when they need to work in the field and snakes are out of their bills due to heavy rain. Goga is the deity who protects from snakes.

Notes and References

ⁱ*ChhathPooja* is the most popular festival in Bihar. In this festival devotees worship various elements of nature and natural resources. For instance, the Sun (source of energy), water (in the form of water resources such as river, pond etc.), various plants (including fruits, vegetables, sugarcane and spices) and animals (elephant, horse etc.).

ⁱⁱOlson, D. T. (1996). *Numbers: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. pp. 135–138.

ⁱⁱⁱQaimkhani Muslims are the descendants of Kayam Khan, a converted Hindu Rajput during the reign of Firoz Shah Tughlaq.

^{iv}Hāṇḍā, O. C. (2004). *Naga Cults and Traditions in the Western Himalaya*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing. p. 330.

^vElliot, H. M. & Beames, J. (1869). *Memoirs on the History, Folk-lore, and Distribution of the Races of the North Western Provinces of India: Being an Amplified Edition of the Original Supplemental Glossary of Indian Terms*. Vol. II London: Trübner & Company. p. 256.

^{vi}Guggal is an herb which is prescribed as medicine to the people of infertility in Ayurveda.

^{vii}Temple, R. C. (1962). *Legends of Punjab*. Vol. I. Patiala: Language Department Punjab.

^{viii}*Medi* or *madi*, a shortened colloquial term for *Samadhi*, consists of a one-room building with a minaret on each corner. There is a Hindu grave inside the building which is marked by a *nishān* (a symbol or sign). That *nishān* is made of a long bamboo with peacock plumes, a coconut, some colored threads and some hand *pankhas* (fans) with a blue flag on the top.

^{ix} *Samādhi* is the final stage in Yoga where an individual, who practices reach to the stage of union with the divine.

^xJohra is a barren land which has a sacred pond in Dadrewa.

^{xi}Kehal, H. S. (2009). *AlopHoRiha Punjabi Virsa*. (Punjabi). Chandigarh: Unistar Books Pvt. Ltd.

^{xii} Khan, D. S. (1998). Is God an Untouchable? A Case of Caste Conflict in Rajasthan. In *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Vol. XVIII. No. 1. P. 21-28.

^{xiii} R.C. Temple. (1962/1884). *Legends of Punjab*. Vol. I. Reprint. Patiala: Language Department Punjab. P.121.

^{xiv}Rose, H. A. (1999). *The Glossary and Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*. 3 Vols. Delhi: Low Price Publications.

^{xv}When Richard Temple sees, in his book *Legends of Punjab* that this deity is followed by the people of lower class then he started believing that Goga is deity of lower class. H. A. Rose also advocates the same.