

Gugga: The Chief Deity of Marginalized People of Himachal Pradesh

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An Abstract : *Gugga* (also spelled *Guga* or *Goga*)—a folk god, said to have been a historical figure and is thought to have been active in the 11th century in Rajsthan—is worshiped in Rajsthan, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh as hero saint, and the protector against snake bites, scorpion bites, infertility, and evil spirits. With strong affiliation with the cult of snake bites and the nath yogi tradition, his life story and the tales of his miraculous deeds are recited in an oral epic tradition almost evenly in Punjab and Himachal. The colonial accounts—by Alexander Cunningham, R. C. Temple, William Crook, H.A.Rose, J. Ph.Vogel, G .W. Briggs—exhibit that *Gugga* (known both, *Vir* and *Pir*) was more popular amongst *marginalised* communities, in particular, the lower castes (*avarnas*) than the upper-caste(*savarnas*, *dvjia*, lit. twice born) people in Punjab and Himachal. This is quite evident from the works of Bhai Vir Sing, Giani Ditt Singh, Gurdit Singh, H. S. Bhatti and Harjot Oberoi etc. In the beginning of previous century, in view of apparent popularity of the *Gugga*, the devotees were vilified by some section of the *dvjia* in term as ‘those who worship him have lost their senses’. In Himachal, unlike Punjab, little seems to be known of the ritual and cultural traditions associated with the worship of *Gugga*. During field study conducted in Himachal Pradesh worship of *Gugga* was found quite widespread amongst *lower castes* Hindu comprises of Chamar, Julaha, Dumana, Bhangi, Dagi, Chanal, Nath, Teli, Hesi, Koli and Girath. *Gugga*’s popularity can be gauged from the fact that *Gugga* deity is *considered a chief deity by majority of lower caste populations in Himachal Pradesh*. It is estimated that in Himachal Pradesh around ninety percent devotees of *Gugga* are from the lower castes. Therefore, keeping in view the *popularity of Gugga among the lower castes (consists 25 percent population of the State)*, the present study is an endeavour to study ritual and culture interconnected with *Gugga* worship in Himachal Pradesh so as to estimate its precise emergence and growth. We have witnessed that *Gugga* being non- Brahmanical deity was deprived of any kind of patronage especially from the princely rulers and wealthy communities of the region during Medieval and later-Medieval period. Therefore we did not come across big temples dedicated to *Gugga* from that period. However, picture seems to have changed during the *late 19th - early 20th century* after the association of Brahmanical rituals with the worship of *Gugga*, till than deity was exclusively associated with lower castes. Since beginning of the 20th century public offerings by the ruling and upper castes had become common features—perceptible till today. We have even noticed Brahmin priests managing and performing the rituals in *Gugga*’s shrines (for e.g. *Gugga Gehrwin*, *Gugga Bhatar* and *Gugga Bhyanu Pir* etc.). Though, the worship of *Gugga* by the upper-castes for their routine needs is quite common, but the Gods of the Hindu pantheon are still their chief objects of worship. These changes, however, indicated a process where the deities of the lower castes that had stayed outside the ambit of the greater religious system were gradually being incorporated into Hindu pantheon.

Key Words: *Gugga*, *Guru Gorakhnath*, *Lowercastes*, *rituals*, *Gugehri*, *Marri*, *Dera*, *Mandli*, *Bhartha*.

Guga (also spelled *Gugga*)— a folk God, said to have been a historical figure and is thought to have been active in the 11th century in Rajsthan— is worshipped in Rajsthan, Gujrat, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Jammu and Himachal Pradesh as hero saint and the protector against snakebites, scorpion bites, infertility and possession by spirits. With strong affiliation with the cult of snake bites and the Nath Yogi tradition, his life story and the tales of his miraculous deeds are recited in an oral epic tradition almost evenly in Punjab and Himachal. For instance, Alexander Cunningham in his *Archaeological Survey* (1882) attests that *Gugga* worship was common amongst lower castes of the Hill States in and around Shimla.¹

Gugga is believed to have been a Chauhan Rajput. When James Tod wrote his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajsthan* (1829), the Chauhan identity of *Gugga* was well- established fact.² The first reference of *Gugga*’s Chauhan lineage probably occurs in seventeenth century text, *Kyamkhan Rasau* of Jan Kavi³ and then in celebrated *Munhta Nainsi Ri Khyat*.⁴ Following to the testimony of *Kyamkhan Rasau*, *Khyat* and other bardic accounts, scholars of Rajsthan have taken the Chauhan lineage of *Gugga* for granted. James Tod calls him *Gugga* of Bhatinda who with his forty sons died in fighting against Mahmud of Ghazni.⁵ However, R.C. Temple,⁶ William Crooke⁷, G.W. Briggs,⁸ Harjot Oberoi⁹ and Anne Murphy¹⁰ have drawn our attention to the contradictory time periods of *Gugga*. According to R.C. Temple “Though the whole story of *Gugga* is involved in the greatest obscurity, however, is one of the chief saints and the objects of worship of the lower classes of all sorts”.¹¹ William Crooke refers to the belief that ‘*Gugga ji*’ was killed in a battle against Firoz Shah who ruled Delhi at the end of the thirteenth century.¹² Unless this ruler was Jalaluddin Firoz Khilji (1290- 1296), no ruler of this name ruled Delhi at the end of the thirteenth century. If this ‘Firoz Shah’ was Illutmish

son Ruknuddin Firoz Shah (The son of Illutmish who ruled Delhi for a few months after his father's death in 1236), Gugga's date will have to be placed in the first half of the fourteenth century. But, if 'Firoz Shah' was Firoz Shah Tuglaq (1351-1388), then, second half of the fourteenth century would be likely the time period of Gugga. The last version has been accepted by some Rajsthani scholars.¹³ Most of the scholars, however, tend to accept Tod's view that Gugga was a contemporary of Mahmud of Ghazni and died in fighting against the Turkish invader.¹⁴

G.W. Briggs says that the birth of Gugga was the result of a wish granted to his mother Bachhal by Guru Gorakhnath. Gugga is depicted as a follower of Guru Gorkahnath and later is believed to have sent an invisible army to help him against Prithvi Raj.¹⁵ The period of Gorkahnath has been fixed by scholars sometime in the eleventh century.¹⁶ Gugga, if at all a historical figure, must have lived during the 11th century.

'Gugga' is one of his many names—other includes Gugga Chauhan (he belonged to Chauhan dynasty of Rajputs), Gugga Rana (he was a Rana or Rao of Dedreva), Gugga Jaharpir¹⁷ (he was a saint (Pir) who possessed power to cure poison, Jahar), Gugga Vir (a great warrior, hero (vir)), Gorakshak (saviour of the cows). In Jammu and Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh, it has been known by the name of Raja Mundlikh. According to G.W. Briggs Gugga was associated with Jafarpanth, a branch of Gorkhpanth. It was because of this association that Gugga acquired the name Jaharpir, distorted version of Jafarpir.¹⁸ Some people claim that Gugga vir, converted to Islam before his death, so that he is really Gugga Pir, a pir being a Muslim saint.¹⁹

As earlier mentioned, the colonial accounts—by James Tod, William Crooke, Alexander Cunningham, R.C. Temple and Briggs—exhibit that Gugga (known as vir and pir) was more popular amongst lower castes (avarnas) than the upper castes

(savarnas; dvija, lit. twice born) people in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. This is quite evident from the works of Bhai Vir Singh, Giani Ditt Singh, Gurdit Singh, Harvinder Singh Bhatti and Harjot Oberoi that Gugga was the part of Punjab's culture in the nineteenth century. Giani Gurdit Singh describes Gugga worship in the rich account of Punjabi village life.²⁰ H.S. Bhatti mentioned in his book that Gugga is worshiped in the month of Bhadon, especially on the ninth day of the month. His bards *Sawiyas* often lower caste *chuhras* beg in his name going from door to door, singing his legends. They carry the standards *nishans* of Gugga—long bamboo stick decorated colorful cloths and peacock feathers—to his shrines known as *marris*. On the ninth day, *nishan* is worshiped and *sawiyas* sing songs of his praise called *sohle*.²¹ In Punjab, Gugga worship also the subject of censure: This censure was highlighted by Harjot Oberoi as an aspect of the rupture in the definition of what it meant to be Sikh in the late 19th century.²² One example of this found in the novel *Sundri*—the first modern Punjabi novel published in 1898 by Bhai Vir Singh, he admonishes women that their practices will make them like Sudra's [*Jadon hor puja te nem dhare, tandon hi shudran vergun ho jaogian*].²³ It seems, Bhai Vir Singh vilifies the devotees of Gugga. Worship of Gugga, is a problem of sentiments that persists among many. Gurdit Singh opened his introduction to Ditt Singh's *Gugga Gapaura* with a comment regarding how people of Punjab have suffered under the force of superstitions.²⁴ In the work itself, the author bemoans how Sikh, who might wear a proper turban, know Gurumukhi, and keep their kesh still engage in the worship of Gugga.²⁵ One of the main narrators of the text, who argues against Gugga worship, claims that those who worship him have lost their senses.²⁶ Yet, despite such opposition, the worship of Gugga has persisted in Punjab. It is an aspect of Punjabinity or Punjabiness as such, it is present in the *Virast* or 'heritage' portion of the Khalsa Virast Kendra in Anandpur, where a small worship site for Gugga is depicted. And while the caste dimensions of the Gugga tradition may have brought it scrutiny, it is perhaps the importance of caste rather than religion in the Gugga tradition that accounts in many ways for the continuing presence of Gugga in the Punjabi Cultural landscape.

In Himachal unlike Punjab, little seems to be known of the ritual and cultural traditions associated with the worship of Gugga. During field study conducted in the different parts of Himachal Pradesh, worship of Gugga was found quite widespread amongst lower castes Hindu comprises of Chamar, Chahal, Bhangis, Julaha (weavers), Dumana, Dagi, Nath, Teli, Girath, Koli, Lohar etc. Gugga's popularity can be gauged from the fact that Gugga deity is considered a chief deity by the majority of lower caste population in Himachal Pradesh. On the basis of field study data, it is estimated that in Himachal Pradesh around Ninety percent devotees of Gugga are from lower castes. Therefore, keeping in view the popularity of Gugga among the lower castes (consists about 25 percent population of the state), the present study is endeavour to study ritual and culture interconnected with Gugga

worship in the state so as to estimate its precise emergence and growth.

It is well known fact that Gugga is not indigenous to Himachal Pradesh, but a much later introduction of the late medieval times. According to Om Chand Handa (Naga Cults and Traditions in the Western Himalaya), "The cult of Gugga Jaharpir was introduced in the hills from Rajputana around the beginning of seventeenth century, when many Rajput families are believed to have migrated to foothills of the western Himalayan region under the hostile conditions in their homeland".²⁷ Sh. Dev Raj Sharma (Gugga Jaharpir) also mentioned that the Gugga cult introduced in the Himachal Pradesh during the early seventeenth century.²⁸ But during field study conducted in the state and information received from the followers of Gugga, shows that Gugga cult is about 500 years old in the state or as old in the Himachal Pradesh as in Punjab because approximately a little less than half of the present area of Himachal Pradesh was the integral part of the Punjab till 1966. H.A. Rose mentioned that, 'Temple *Sibo-da-Thaan* in Bharmad (District Kangra), some 500 years ago Sibbo, a barber (lower caste) used to worship Gugga, who pleased his devotion, directed him to build a shrine. So, he created a shrine in which he enshrined the God's image and Gugga conferred on him power to snake-bite.²⁹ There are many legends and miracles behind the creation of Gugga's shrine in many parts of the state, support the argument that Gugga cult was about 500 years old in the Himachal Pradesh.

The worship of Gugga is common amongst lower castes in the districts of Kangra, Hamirpur, Una, Bilaspur, Solan, Chamba, Mandi, Kullu, Shimla, Sirmour. In these districts Gugga is known by different names viz., Gugga Chauhan, Gugga Rana, Gugga Jaharpir, Nile Ghore-Ka Swar, Gugga vir etc. However, he is popularly addressed as Gugga Jaharpir or Gugga pir. According to one tradition³⁰ he is found in a cradle sucking a live cobras's head. Thus, he came to be regarded as the greatest of the snake kings. That may indicate beyond any doubt that it is the fear against snake-bite that has made him so popular among the folk in Himachal Pradesh, although some of the upper castes also worshipped him. However, the later consideration may not be having any bearing on his cultic aspect, in which he is represented as a snake and in human form.³¹ Another manifestation of this cult prevalent in the Chamba district is known as *Mundlikh* i.e. the headless representation of Gugga Jaharpir.³²

The Gugga shrines are widely scattered everywhere in the State. Notable of these have been identified, but there are many other at various places, and day in and day out, new ones coming up. The list may, therefore, be never complete. The highest number of Gugga shrine may be found in Bilaspur, Hamirpur, Kangra, Una and Solan districts of the state. The shrines of Gugga exist almost in all villages and the anthills are consider to be the Shrines of the Gugga where proper shrine do not exist. Some villages or a group of villages have common shrine. While some of the shrines are popular in wider areas and most are local shrines. Numerous legends are associated with the important shrines which emphasize their popularity and the power of protection of people from snake-bites, evil spirits and infertility e.g. Gugga shrines of Gehrwin, Bhatar, Saloh, Sibbo-da-thaan, Shahpur and Kutiare-da-Gugga claim to cure the snake-bite by making the patients eat of the sacred earth of the place and rubbing some of it on the wound. These Gugga shrines are called *thaan*³³ or *mari*³⁴, popularly known as *Gugeheri*.³⁵ The inexpensive and ordinary construction of Gugeheri's explain their popular nature. It seems that these Gugga Shrines were built by the lower caste people. As H.A. Rose mentioned that the famous shrines of Gugga saloh and Baba Sibbo-da-thaan in Kangra District built by Girath and Nai (Barber) family respectively.³⁶ Some of other famous shrines are Gugga Chaksarai (Una), Gugga Lahra (Hamirpur), Gugga Loren (Kullu), Gugga Nalagarh, Gugga Palewar in Sahu (Chamba), Gugga Haripur (Sirmour) and Gugga Ladakhi Mohalla (Shimla) etc. All the functionaries of these shrines, Chela, Pujari (Priests) etc. are the persons from the lower castes and the post of priest is also hereditary. For example, in the District of Chamba the Gugga Shrines Garh, Tur, Ghorni, Jharoli, Moa and Alla have pujari from Chamar, Rathi, Sabil and weaver castes.³⁷ The shrines, sibbo-da-thaan³⁸ and Gugga saloh have pujaris from Nai and Girth caste. In the famous shrine of Loren³⁹, pujari is from chamar caste. All the rituals and worship are performed by these low caste pujaris. These shrines contains images of Gugga, Guggari, Gorkakhnath, each mounted on horse. In the shrines of Chamba district the Gugga (Mundlikh) is represented by a stone figure of a man on horseback, accompanied by similar figures of his sister Guggari, a deified heroine, his wazir, kailu and others.⁴⁰ The legend of Gugga in Chamba also different from the Gugga legends prevailing in Punjab and other parts of Himachal Pradesh.⁴¹

Gugga is worshiped on the ninth day of Bhandon. The ninth day of Bhandon known as Gugga *Naumi* and it is believed to the day of Gugga's birth and has special significance. On the occasion of Gugga Naumi, big fairs are organized at the various famous shrines

of Gugga across the state. The bards or the group of disciples called 'Gugga Mandlis' go bare footed from the door to door singing Gugga legend and heroic songs of his praise and beg on his name. This is performed from the day of *Raksha Bandhan* to another eight day till Ashtami. The Gugga Mandlis reached Gugga shrine on Ashtami after performing the door to door campaign. In these day *Dera*⁴² is also performed every night at aforesaid places. *Dera* is also organized at the house of devotees. The members of Gugga Mandli comes from the lower caste only. During the month of Bhandon the ritual begging not only suspend their economic operations but it becomes a counter model of their economic activities. The offerings to the Gugga are always made in *Sawa* system. If one rupee is to offered, it is offered by one forth to it, corn is offered in the quantity either *sawa ser* (1.25) or *sawa panj ser* (5.25), symbolising continuity. The devotees of Gugga scoope the earth before entering his shrine. The touching and scooping earth before entry symbolises the submission and devotion of the devotees and association of the cult of Gugga with the earth, as Gugga disappears into the earth and become one with it. After entering the shrine, devotees bow their heads or *Matha tekna* before the Gugga Jaharpir. This ritual signifies the submission, devotion and seeking the protection from snake-bite and evil spirits. After *Matha tekna* the devotees offer *Rot* (cakes)⁴³. After offering a portion to the Gugga, the rest of the Rot is distributed and called *Parshad*. During the annual worship when Gugga Mandli sings the legend of the Gugga, some of the devotees get possessed, they howl, shriek and wildly beat themselves with the *chhari's* of the Gugga. After sometime they cool down and came back to the normal state. In the shrines of Gugga sloh, Gugga Bhatar and Gugga Gehrwin, the Chela or Pujari also get possessed. In the society of Himachal, the spirit possession is known as *opera or operi kasar*. Snake-bite and other skin diseases caused by snake poison is called *Mehar* (kindness). Another rituals, *Dhuna*, a fire place is almost an integrals part of the Gugga shrine and is especially lit on *Naumi* and burns for the whole night. Chhari, which looks like a snake, is supposed to represent symbolically Gugga as the Jaharpir and, thus, the king of snake. In Chamba district, it is believed that Gugga was died on the 9th day of the dark half in the month of Bhandon, called *Gugga Navami*.⁴⁴ From that day, for eight days his *Shradha*, called *Gugganah*, is observed at his shrine.⁴⁵ On that occasion, the Gugga

(Mudlikh) legend is sung by the Gugga Mandlis to the accompaniment of music with such a touching notes that the listeners are often moved to tears. Beside Naumi fair, monthly fair is also organized on the first Sunday of *Jaysth* month at the shrines of Gugga sloh, Bab-Sibo-da-thaan, Kutiare-da-Gugga, Larha-Galore etc. In these shrines Gugga not only cures snake-bite but also bestows sons and good fortune. His offerings are first fruits, goats, cakes etc.⁴⁶ The followers visit these Gugga Shrines to pay on obligatory homage on the occasion of Birth, Mundan, Marriage etc. Such occasional visits to the shrines are known as *Jatras*. During field study conducted at Gugga saloh, Present researcher witnessed hundred of followers in the fair and the followers belongs to lower castes came with their families from far off corners. Most of them stayed at the shrine in the open for three or four days. They were not able to buy food owing to their poor economic conditions. Such devotional commitment however was not visible among the upper castes followers for whom Gugga was just one of the deity of Hindu Pantheon. For the lower castes devotees, on the other hand, Gugga was the chief deity. We have witnessed that Gugga being a non-brahmanical deity was deprived of any kind of patronage especially from the princely rulers and wealthy communities of the region during medieval and late medieval period. Therefore, we did not come across big temples dedicated to Gugga from that period.

However, picture seems to have changed during the late 19th - early 20th century after the association of Brahmanical rituals with the worship of Gugga, till than Gugga was exclusively associated with lower castes. In the beginning of the 20th century public offering's by the ruling and upper castes had become a common features. Now photos, calendars and idols of the Gugga mounted on horses are gradually replacing the traditional iconography of the Gugga and structural representation (simple and inexpensive) were marked with significant changes soon after Gugga began to be worshiped by upper castes and receiving the patronage of princely rulers. The popular Gugga shrines restructured into splendid buildings with the help of dominant sections of the society. Public offerings by the ruling and upper castes become common features perceptible till today. We have even noticed that the members of Gugga Mandli which chanted the Gugga legend alsobelongs to the upper castes. Brahmin priests are also managing and performing the rituals in the famous temples of Gerhwin, Bhatar (Barmana) & Bhyanupir in Bilaspur district of Himachal Pradesh. These changes indicated a process where deity of lower castes that had remained outside the ambit of the brahmanical religious systems were gradually being incorporated into it. With the inclusion of the upper castes as followers, Brahmanical patterns have made

inroads into the non-Brahmanical traditions of the Gugga cult. The rituals and traditions followed by the upper castes are transmitted through hagiographical materials. The markets near the famous Gugga temples are flooded with booklets that have legends fashioned along the lives of Brahmanical religious pattern i.e. Gugga Chalisa, Gugga Puran, a religious narrative composed in the 20th century that attempts to project him a puranic God.

CONCLUSION: The largest devotees of Gugga in Himachal Pradesh belongs to lower castes known as marginalized section which have strong faith in the worship of Gugga. Only these castes which are out of brahmanical ambit (system) since century, preserved performed and popularized the Gugga cult and its related legends, rituals, customs and practices. During 19th century upper castes also started to worship the Gugga just one of the deity of Hindu pantheon but it is the Chief deity of the marginalized section only. Many elements of the brahmanical religion percolate down to the lowest levels of society and in course of time become an integral part of the religious life of lower castes. But it should be emphasized that while the upper castes and the lower castes may share certain beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and artifacts, their attitudes towards lower castes will differ owing to the relations of dominance and power within society. This is amply clear from the various famous Gugga shrines of Himachal Pradesh, where thousands of devotees from different castes congregate in the three-five day long fairs to pay their obeisance to Gugga. Though, the worship of the Gugga by the upper caste for their routine needs is quite common, but the Gods of the Hindu Pantheon are still their chief objects of worship. These changes, however, indicated a process where the deity of the lower castes that had stayed outside the ambit of the greater religious system were gradually being incorporated into the Hindu Pantheon.

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³¹ Handa, *Naga Cults and Traditions in the Western Himalaya*, p. 318.

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³³ Thaan: A Simple platform with a symbol of the deity engraved on a stone or terracotta slab and a flag, is known as Thaan.

³⁴ Meri: A Small temple like structure constructed on natural mound of earth with a flag of the Gugga unfurled on top is termed as Meri.

³⁵ Gugeheri: In Himachal, Thaan and Meri popularly known as Gugeheri

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⁴⁰ Sharma, *Gugga Jaharpir*, p. 42.

⁴¹ Brahm Dutt Sharma, 'Himachal Me Pujit Gugga Jaharpir' *Somsi*, Shimla: Himachal Art, Language and Cultural Academy, 1987, No. 1, p. 44.

⁴² *Dera* is a ceremony in which a Gugga Mandli come to the house of host and chant or narrate the whole story of Gugga to the audience called Bharth this process goes on through the night.

⁴³ Rose, *A Glossary of Tribes and Castes of the Punjab N.W.F. P*, pp. 189.

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