



## Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra: Cultural, Religious and Environmental Evolution

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### ABSTRACT

Nanda Devi is the second-highest mountain in India, with an elevation of 7817 meters. The literal meaning of Nanda Devi is “Bliss-Giving Goddess”. In the state of Uttarakhand, in the regions of Garhwal and Kumaon, Nanda Devi is a deity as well, who is revered, worshipped, and loved by the hilly people. The rituals and procession of Nanda Devi have many myths and lore attached to them, which have been orally transmitted from generation to generation. There have been a few transformations in the rituals, and some rituals are being followed in the same manner as they were followed centuries ago. The paper will attempt to study the transformation and reform of the rituals, and the factors that have kept the tradition alive, and further helped the people to make this festival and pilgrimage of Nanda Devi as an integral part of their cultural heritage and identity.

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### Introduction:

Nanda Devi is an aboriginal and primordial goddess of the Garhwal and Kumaon regions of the north Indian state of Uttarakhand. Referred to as the 'Bliss-giving goddess', Nanda Devi is the patron deity of the Kumaon and Garhwal regions of Uttarakhand, also mentioned in the tenth-century Sanskrit inscription found in *Pandukeshwar*: '*Nanda Bhagwati Charan kamal kamalas nath mirthab*' (Aitken, 1994). Though till the nineteenth century, there was no written evidence of the Raj Jat Yatra available.

Only the lore of Nanda Devi has been transferred from generation to generation orally. People have revered and venerated the lore of Devi in the hilly society, and the rituals regarding the *dhiyani* (Daughter), Devi, accompanied by the four-horned kharu, the involvement of out-married daughters in the rituals, and Jagar have kept the tradition and cultural heritage alive, resulting in the whole process into a sacred landscape which unifies the whole hilly society. Taylor (2012) believes that human action only transforms a regular place into a sacred landscape by unifying diverse rituals to converge within a cohesive narrative framework. The tribal communities of the Himalayas find spirituality in their valleys, caves, forests, and rocky outcrops through their animistic traditions (Zurick, Julsun, Shreshtha, & Bajracharya, 2005). As the Himalayan region has tough landscapes, harsh weather conditions, and extreme cold areas, these geographical conditions evoke certain fear in the common folk. The fears become the primary force towards the evolution of cults. Destructive elements of nature give birth to the cults in any region. As per Jain (1995), “the evolution of cult in different tribal and primitive societies throughout the world has been accredited to the fear-psychosis generated by the incomprehension of the surrounding physical and elemental reality. The incomprehensible darkness of night in deep caves, which had been the abode of primitive men, was given an anthropomorphic representation by them in the form of Kali. Kali has been called by different names in different communities, but carries almost similar characteristics- furious and thus feared. It was this terrible goddess who subsequently gave rise to the universal cult of the mother goddess in the nascent days of civilization.”

There are several legends related to the origin of the Goddess. She is considered as the daughter of Chand Kings. In another region, she is considered the consort of lord Shiva. Still, the aspect which is uniting in nature is that the Goddess is considered as the bliss-giving goddess, fertility providing deity, and in particular regions like Kumaon, she is considered, revered, and loved as the daughter of the kings of the Chand dynasty. The Chand dynasty once ruled from their capital in Chapawat. Thus, in the region of Kumaon, it becomes imperative for the current descendants of the Chand dynasty to be involved in the annual procession or the yatra of the goddess. The very hymns of the Goddess capture the divinity, and the space the Goddess occupies in the region. In the book *The Nanda Devi Affair*, Bill Aitken notes the hymns that praise Nanda Devi. He describes,

“Long live Nanda Devi in her awesome majesty, greatest of Goddesses from whom all blessings flow. Daughter of kings, sister of rishis, She alone makes plain the way of the gods, honoured in the eyes of both Nauti and Almora, worshipped in all the villages of Dasholi and Badhan. Mother, thy home

is in Krur and thy husband's dwelling in Devrara. Seated in thy palanquin shall we not bear thee aloft in procession? Thou residest six months in Krur and six months in Badhan.” (Aitken, 173)

The village of Nauti, represents Devi's native village, the place to which she is most attached. The lore of the Devi asserts that she is an out-married daughter of the region, and she is hesitant of the tough, distant, and untried neighbour where her in-laws reside. Along with the legends of deity's belonging to the region, the deity's procession is carried over annually, which is called as *Jat*. On the other hand, a duodecennial procession is carried over from the temple of Nauti village in the Chamoli district to the Hom Kund, which is further known as the Raj Jat Yatra, and also known as the 'Himalayan Kumbha'. The yatra is known as the Himalayan Kumbha because it is carried over once in twelve years, thus, the time between Raj-Jat yatra and *Kumbha* is twelve years, which matches with the Hindu rituals of sacred bathing, at a specific time once in twelve years. It is not only a festival but also a pilgrimage for the hilly people of the Himalayas. These pilgrimage pathways, spanning across different regions and cultures, display some common characteristics, ranging from physical features of the landscape, such as water bodies, mountains, forests, etc. Many of the pilgrimage sites reflect characteristics that are unique to their own, especially intangible cultural associations. Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra is such a pilgrimage process that is a unique procession, carrying rich cultural heritage, and local and traditional beliefs. In a similar manner, the route or the path of the procession of Nanda Devi is characterized by river valleys, settlements, agricultural fields, dense forest areas, alpine pasture lands, perennial lakes, and snow-clad mountain peaks. This route is called the Nanda Path. The route has 11 stoppages in the villages such as Eda Badhani, Kanswan, Sem, Koti, Bhagoti, Kulsari, Chepadyun, Nandakeshari, Faldiya, Mundoli, and Wan. It goes through several sub-cultural realms of Chandpur, Ganga Par, and Badhan. The altitude of these villages varies from 1100 m to 2444 m. The last inhabited village is Wan (2444 m). A motorable road goes up to Wan Village. However, the priests and a large number of pilgrims follow the procession by walking. The Jat Yatra becomes an instrument of uniting the whole hilly society, as it involves people from every walk of the society, be it women, girls, out-married daughters, men, people from Shilpkar communities who are generally considered subordinate to the Rajputs and Brahmins. People from the shilpkar community carry along the drum, and the drum is played by them during the procession. Chandra Singh Negi in his book *In the Garb of Nanda Devi Raj Jat* observes that,

“One of the most evident ways in which villages create and affirm their unity during the pilgrimages of Nanda Devi and other deities is through the mixing and sharing the items or ingredients required for carrying out the ritual, the worship. These obligatory items- viz., cash, milk, butter, yogurt,

grains, plants, flour, sugar, salt, tea, and so on, are collected from each and every household within the village.” (Negi 24)

The rituals of the Raj-Jat Yatra include carrying the devi in a palanquin, and the people are dressed in their traditional attire. Women are called upon from their in-laws' home to be involved in the ritual of the Nanda Devi yatra, as the ritual is considered to be incomplete without the involvement of the out-married daughters. Out-married daughters are called as *dhiyani* in the Garhwal region. Women, drummers, and priests from the Rajput and Brahmin castes carry the devi's palanquin. The devi's palanquin is carried by four priests. The palanquin is usually constructed of mango wood, as mango wood is considered sacred and pious in the region. Villagers believe that Devi herself directs the movements of the palanquin. Her palanquin is heavy, and the belief that goes around for the heaviness of the palanquin is that the Devi doesn't want to return to her husband's home. Contrary to that, the weight of the palanquin is lighter, while the process returns to her *mait*, her natal home. The reluctance of the deity to move ahead towards her in-laws' home is expressed by making the very palanquin heavier. Nanda Devi curses her *mait*, or the natal home, because they grew indifferent to her. The remedy the curse of *dhiyani*, she is invited back to her natal home. William Sax observes the rituals of Raj-Jat Yatra and argues that

“The villagers believe that the rituals for Nanda Devi will not be successful unless their daughters come home: their participation is a precondition of the ritual's success; put simply-Obligatory. This latter pre-requisite of the participation of the *dhiyani* to participate in her *mait*'s rituals falsify the very concept of Gotra Parivartan or put simply her ties with her maternal home; for this very act of her obligatory presence in her natal home's rituals, exemplifies the fact that the woman in Garhwal remains part of her *mait*, even after her marriage.” (Sax 1991)

A four-horned ram also accompanies and leads the procession, along with the idol of Shri Nanda Devi and the priests. The procurement of a four-horned ram is considered propitious and taken as a sign of the Devi's indication of approval for the twelve-yearly Raj-Jat yatra. Animal sacrifice has been an obligatory ritual of the Raj-Jat Yatra. In certain regions, buffalo sacrifice rituals were also done. Though after the Gandhian reforms, Buffalo sacrifices are abolished in most of the region, other than the secret and unrevealed ceremonies of sacrifices. Bill Aitken notes in *The Nanda Devi Affair*,

“The influence of Gandhian reform was yearly reducing the superstitious content of the festival especially in substituting for the gruesome buffalo sacrifice the symbolic vegetarian offering of a

coconut. Back in the village, such squeamish compromise was viewed with more than derision. The high caste hillman, forever squirming under the accusation of unorthodoxy by his plains brotherhood, took this opportunity to defend the traditional mode of sacrifice since it included the bonus of a sanded source of meat. Nanda Devi's popularity partly turned on her non-vegetarian tastes."

Women's menstrual blood is associated with impurity; menstruating women are considered dangerous and are secluded from the mainstream household work. Even the Raj Jat Yatra, which is organised in honour of a female deity, is not devoid of the Brahminical notions of impurity of women. The tragedy of Rup Kund is associated with the presence of women. One version depicts that some king took dancer girls along with them, and thus the angst of the holy mountain turned them into stone. Aitken notes that,

"The Nanda Devi folklore emphasises Brahmanical disgust at the inherent uncleanness of women and attributes the Rup Kund disaster to the impurest condition of all occasioned by the toils of child-birth." (Aitken 122)

It is contradictory to the people of a hilly society, on one hand, they worship the female deity, while contrary to that they keep women away from some parts of the yatra due to the Brahminical notion of impurity. This paradox of worshipping women religiously, however, treating them differently on the ground is a peculiar characteristic of the hilly society.

## Conclusion

Nanda Devi has several aspects attached to its presence in the hilly region of Garhwal and Kumaon. The Goddess plays an instrumental role in shaping the identity of the region through its unique rituals, beliefs, and lore. She harbours hope, wisdom, happiness, celebration in the people, along with that, it provides the region something unique and apart from the mainstream Hindu pantheon. The rituals are unique to the region, and in the broader scheme of things, they align in some degree with the mainstream Hindu pantheon. As the region has oracular, shamanistic traditions of spirit possession and animal sacrifices, the social and Gandhian reforms have played a role in educating people to practice the rituals in a more vegetarian way. The cult of Devi follows the sending back of women and drummers from a particular cast, indicating at the origin of the deity as local, who believes in the cast segregation, pollution through women's menstrual blood, and the concepts of purity.

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