

ANCIENT WANGATH STONE TEMPLES OF KASHMIR

Hindus have a tradition of building holy shrines/ temples on spots full of natural beauty, on the top of mountains, in forests, in caves and near the sources of rivers.

Sir Walter Lawrence wrote in 'The Valley of Kashmir', "Kashmir is full of temples, shrines, centers of pilgrimage or *Tirthas*. Almost every peak, cave and spring has a temple dedicated to Shiva, Bhavani, Ganesh, Vishnu, and Buddha."



WANGATH TEMPLES

Wangath (Vangat) is a village situated about fifty kilometers north-west of Srinagar enroute to famous Gangbal Lake. Wangath is the ancient Vashisth Ahsram, named after Sage Vashistha. He, as per tradition, stayed here while consecrating the *Linga* called Jyestharudra at Naran Nag.

In Nilmat Purana, Lord Shiva says to Nandi; "You shall live in my company in a place at a distance of one *Yojana* from here towards east. O Nandi, the gifted sage Vashistha on the earth shall erect your image and also mine at that place."

Kalhana notes in Rajatarangini, that the town of Srinagri was built by Emperor Ashoka, in the third century BC. His son Jalauka, 220 BC, built Shaivite temples, Bhutesvara and Jyestharudra and *Muthas* in the Wangath valley, around the holy spring of Naran Nag, at Buthser.

There is a spring at Wangath, which is known as Naran Nag. In ancient times this spring was known as Sodara Nag. Around Naran Nag, a complex of temples is known as Wangath temples. The Wangath temples were built in three groups, around the same time as Sankaracharya temple at Srinagar and Bumazuv temple near Mattan on Srinagar-Pahalgam road, were built.

According to Harmukat-Ganga Mahatmya, the particular region around the spring of Sodara Nag was also known as Bhuteshvara or Shiva Bhutesha---the lord of beings. The entire area is clad with dense forests. Roaring stream of Kanaknai or Karanknadi flows to the south of Sodara *Tirtha*. It is formed of the tributaries, which flow out from the sacred Nund Kol and Gangbal lakes. The Nilmat Purana describes the spiritual merits of taking a bath in Sodara Nag. It says that a bath in Sodara Nag has a purifying effect on soul and body.



WANGATH TEMPLE RUINS

Bishop Crowie and Major Cole have identified the ruins of seventeen temple structures of various ages and dimensions at Buthser, near Wangath, distributed in two distinct groups; the first, on the western side and second on the eastern side. Each group was enclosed by a separate stone-wall, a short distance away from each other. The temples in the eastern group were known as Rajadainbal. The main temple was dedicated to Shiva-Buteshvara. The temple complex on western side, known as Nagbal, had the main temple of Shiva-Jyestharudra.

The first group of six temples is situated within an enclosure wall. The principal temple is a square of twenty-five feet and has two entrances opposite each other in the north-east and south-west sides. It has domed ceiling and core of the roof consists of rubble-stone masonry in lime. The interior measures seventeen feet square. In the centre of the floor is square space, which is unpaved. It marks

the site of the pedestal of the image. The two sides, which are closed, are decorated externally with square-topped recesses, each of which contains the pedestal of an image which was probably a replica of the one in the sanctum itself. Externally the roof is pyramidal. This temple has been identified by Stein, as Shiva-Jyestharudra.

The small temple, to the left possesses niches on the three sides. The temple immediately touching the porch of the preceding shrine is a single square structure, plain both internally and externally. Behind this is a basement of another small temple. Its super-structure has fallen down. Of the two temples behind, one has its entrance facing south-east and the other faces north-east.

The second group of temples is situated about two hundred yards farther off. It is enclosed in a massive rectangular stone wall pierced by a two-chambered gateway. Inside the wall are six structures in ruins and partly buried under the ground. The largest temple has a seventeen feet square base internally, and is similar to the largest temple in the first group. This temple has been identified by Stein, as Shiva-Bhuteshvara.

Between the two groups of temples are number of structures of *Muthas* of third group. An impressive rectangular cistern, eighteen feet long, hammered out of a huge boulder, is nearby. Besides, there are remains of a building of a special type, measuring one hundred twenty feet by seventy feet with a height of ten feet. Along with the sides of this structure are over thirty monolithic bases or piers at regular intervals of about twelve feet. This was a pillared pavilion of *Mutha*.

The Wangath temples are dedicated to Shiva-Bhutesa and Shiva-Ugresa. Close to the temple of Shiva Bhutesha are the remains of the ruins of the temple dedicated to Bhairava and Matrachakra, seven mothers. Matrachakra or *Saptamatrka* represents divine energies, which maintain balance in the universe by combating the evil and upholding the good.

According to a legend, Shiva liberated Parvati, Jyestha, from *daityas* here and on marrying she took the name of Jyesthesa. In the Jyestharudra temple of Wangath, Shiva is worshipped as *linga*. Nilmat Purana mentions that the consecration and the first worship of the Jyestharudra *linga* are distinctly attributed to Rishi Vashistha. *Linga* was worshipped here under the name of Svayambhuh i.e. natural stone and not sculptured one. Cowie identified the base of a giant *Linga* at the south-west corner of the enclosure.

There are three sites in Kashmir, where Shiva Jyesthesa was worshipped under this name or equivalents of Jyesthesvara and Jyestharudra. These are Mount Harmukh, near Tripuresvara, modern Triphar, i.e. between Mahadev and Suresvar and in the close neighbourhood of Srinagar. The similar *Lingas* are worshipped at Sharika (Hari) Parvat and Suresvari.

Many Hindu kings of Kashmir, from time to time, raised temples at Wangath, around Naran Nag. The earliest evidence about the shrine goes back to 253 BC,

when king Narendraditya I, alias Khimkhila was ruling Kashmir. He consecrated shrines of Shiva Bhutesvara and founded a permanent endowment for feeding of Brahmans. His Guru Ugra constructed shrines of Shiva Ugresa and Matrachakra.



Ruins of Wangath Temples

According to Rajatarngini, king Jaluka, 137 BC, erected a stone temple at Nandiksetra for Shiva Bhutesa and offered precious stones and other wealth to the temple. The offerings of flowers made of precious metals and stones are mentioned in various Shiva *Paddhatis* still in use in Kashmir. This temple has been identified with Shiva-Bhuteshvara temple of Wangath.

Lalitaditya Muktapida, on return from his victorious expeditions, presented a huge sum of his war booty, as an offering to the shrine. He erected a lofty stone temple of Shiva Jyestharudra in close proximity to the shrine at Wangath and also made a grant of land and villages. King Avantivarman made a pedestal with silver conduit for bathing of sacred image (*Snanadroni*).

Harmukat Ganga Mahatmya says, “One may obtain prominence among the Ganas by seeing Hara Bhutesvara, Jyestharudra and Nandi after taking a bath in the holy Sodara Nag. The merits of taking a bath in Sodara Nag and Uttarmansa, Gangabal are same.” In fact, Uttarmansa is believed to be the abode of Sodara Nag and the linga Jyethesa at Wangath is washed with water from Uttarmansa Lake. One is believed to attain the merit of performing Rajasuya and Asvamedha by taking a bath in Sodara Nag.

According to a legend, the site of ‘Uttaramanasa’ which is believed to be the source of Haramukuta-Ganga, Gangbal in Kashmiri, lies at the foot of the north-eastern glacier of the Haramukuta and along with the *tirthas* of Nandiksetra. At a short distance below the Gangabal Lake, also called Uttara-Ganga, there

exists another lake called Nund Kol. The inner portion of this lake with blue water, Kala-Shiva, marks the place where Shiva sat in meditation and the outer portion having light green water represents the place of Nandi, the son of a Brahman named Silada, is said to have performed penance to propitiate Shiva at this place. Shiva made this permanent abode by the side of His faithful attendant, Nadin, who is believed to have received the formula of the thousand names of Bhavani from Shiva, known as Bhavani-Nama-Sahasra-Stutih there.



Ruins of Wangath Temples

In Jayendra's time 61 BC, the three most famous shrines of Shiva worship were Bhutesa, Vardhamanesa (Ganpatyar), and Vijayeya (Bijbehara). Sandhimati 24 BC, alias Aryarja of Vikramaditya dynasty, also used to worship Sodara tirtha at Wangath. Kalhana writes; "when he went about to beg his food, he was welcomed with much respect as a follower of the observances ordained by Shiva. The wives of the ascetics vied eagerly in every hermitage to give him alms. But as his alms-bowl was filled with choice fruits and blossoms by the trees, he who deserved respect had not to suffer the humiliation of mendicancy even when he lived the life of renunciation."

King Jayasimha also consecrated a Linga of Shiva called Bhutesvara here. His prime minister, Srngara would make available ample provisions for celebrations on full moon day of Asadha. This festival of 'Devas Vapana' mentioned in Nilmat Purana, would be celebrated over ten days. Kalhana describes about Srngara's arrangements, "in recent times even kings could not have imitated." Sumans, a brother of the minister Rilhana in the reign of Jayasimha built a *Mutha* at Bhutesvara and offered to his *Pitirs*, the holy water of Kanakvahini (Kankni).



RUINS OF WANGATH TEMPLES

Kalhan's family was equally devoted to this shrine. His father Canpaka paid frequent visits to the shrines of Nandiksetra i.e, Buthser and made rich endowments there. Every year he would spend seven days at this tirtha and utilise his entire savings there. Ultimately, he retired to Nandikstra. Kalhan's uncle Kanaka also used to frequently visit this shrine. In fact, the nearest town of Kangan, old name Kanakpora, is named after him.

(Excerpt from Kashmir—Hindu Shrines by Chaman Lal Gadoo)

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