



Vanished or Erased: A Curious Case of Princess Champavati of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

There is an ongoing debate in historians on the presence of women in history. Where nationalist historians always admired their presence anyhow, Marxist historians challenged the notion from their position, status, presence and contribution. Also, women were hardly noticed beyond royal and elite class. Here in the present study, we are observing a curious case of a princess named Champavati during 10th century Chamba in Himachal Pradesh. The case of her disappearance has formed the base of the present study on the grounds that: a) under what circumstances she disappeared, b) what was the justification of such disappearance, c) how several unattended questions kept floating in the pages of history.

The case forms a strong base of patriarchy and its suppression, arrival of brahmins and their impact in temple formation of Champavati. The floating stories have been addressed through source-based arguments. The simultaneous disappearance of Charpat Nath has also been taken under consideration with challenge on his existence in that particular time period when this princess disappeared. Thus, the present study is a unique contribution through a case probing in the history of Chamba and gender issues.

Keywords: Champavati, Princess, Charpat, Nath-panth, Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

Introduction:

Chamba is presently one of the districts in Himachal Pradesh with its historicity dating back to 6-7th century through inscriptions and literary base. This region first emerges from the mists of Rigvedic and post-Vedic texts yet remains shrouded in clouds of uncertain historical background till second century BC when numismatic evidences appear as concrete sources of its existence with the lacuna of not providing detailed description as evidence to know society or place names of the area much. However, it is only from the beginning of the eighth century AC that epigraphic gleanings sparkle the name of the place as Brahmaur and allow one to reconstruct socio-religious structures along with political developments taking place in the area.

Indian sub-continent witnessed in ancient past that female has received the most explicit recognition starting from Harappan mother goddess to Kali, Durga, Parvati and various other incarnations of goddesses who are related to power, fertility, child-bearing, wealth, knowledge, war and several other powers. Sacrifice remained a part of several religious rituals related to female goddesses and female herself. With the passage of time, these sacrifices were venerated and sacrificed women acquired status of goddess. Several regions in Indian past remained deeply attached to such narratives where dilution of goddess from women incarnation travelled through oral narratives, literature and epigraphs. Almost in every district of India oral stories travelled generation-to-generation where woman was converted into goddess.

Chamba region of present Himachal Pradesh also did not remain deprive of such narratives of goddesses who earlier used to be queens and princesses. These were sacrificed and later their temples were erected and worship started. Bharmour remained the capital till 10th century when a king Sahil Varman decided to shift Chamba as capital city. He was accompanied by his wife Nenna and daughter Champavati. Queen Nenna sacrificed herself for bringing water in the city and Champavati disappeared because king had suspicion on her being involved with a saint/sadhu. Later a temple was erected in her memory which is still surviving.

The case of human turned goddess from the family of Sahilvarman in 10th century is Champavati. The *Antiquities of Chamba*, *History of Punjab Hill States* and *Gazetteer of Chamba* remained literary mainstay to understand the case of Champavati. Oral narratives formed third tangent to supplement or sometimes contradict other sources. In the light of contradiction of sources, still the case of mysterious disappearance of a princess in Chamba named Champavati remained unsolved. A temple is there in Chamba where her worship takes place.

The present paper takes back the history of Chamba in 10th century and tries to re-look on the case of vanishing away of Champavati, the daughter of the king Sahil varman and queen Nenna. It tries to understand the historicity of Charpat saints in the valley. In the backdrop of political and religious interplay between Brahmanism and polity, the case of disappearance of Champavati becomes curious base for the present study.

In the both, *Gazetteer of Chamba*¹ and *History of Punjab Hill States*² it comes out that Sahil Verman was an ambitious king who wanted to expand the territory of his empire in Ravi Valley. On his expedition, he was accompanied by Charpatnath, one of the yogis, and also by his queen and daughter.³ Previous to its occupation by Sahil Verman, the plateau on which the town of Chamba stand was within the domain of a rana, who had conveyed it in *sasan* or gift to a family of Kanwan Brahman. Champavati, the king's daughter, took a great liking to the place, and asked her father to found a town and make it his capital. Sahil Verman was desirous of acceding to her wish, but all the land fit for building purpose had passed in to the hands of the Brahmins, and he was unwilling to dispossess them. After a due settlement/arrangement, the land was given up, and the above condition has been observed ever since. The king then founded the town, and named it Champa after his daughter.⁴

In the Vamshavali the shrine of Mahishasurmardini (Bhadrakali in Vamashavali) as a territorial goddess Champavati was built by Sahil Verman, as the tutelary deity of Chamba.⁵ Legend has also been down by tradition in connection with the founding of the

Champavati or Chamasni Temple, probably the first erected by Sahil Verma in Chamba. His daughter Champavati was of a religious disposition, and used to visit the place of Sadhu for conversation. Suspicion was instilled into her father's mind, and he followed her on one occasion with drawn sword in his hand, only however to find that the house was Empty. As he entered, a voice came from the stillness upbraiding him for his suspicions, and telling him that his child had been taken from him as a punishment. He was further commanded to erect a temple to her on the spot where he stood, to atone for his sin, and avert calamity from his house. The temple was accordingly built, and named after his daughter, who is there worshiped as goddess.⁶ In this legend or mythological story the question occurs that, where did Champavati disappear? Why her temple was erected at that place? However, that either Champavati or the queen was killed during the establishment of the town around which several myths have evolved⁷ several facts either deliberately been ignored or were veiled.

Out of three temples, the temple of Champavati is third and last temple erected by Sahil Verman. It enshrines a black stone image of the goddess called Champavati measuring 70 cm. the six-armed devi is shown and has a crown, she is decked with ekāvali and beaded hara.⁸ The genealogy provided in the *Antiquities of Chamba*, mention of Champavati as the territorial goddess:

...on the bank of Irvati the town of Campa, which was before adorned with Campaka tress and guarded by the goddess Champavati, having slain the buffalo and others.⁹

The royal genealogy, though silent on this incident, refer to the foundation of the town and to the ritual sacrifice of a buffalo that was made on this occasion.¹⁰ A fair (locally called Jatar) in connection with the memory of Champavati as name given to the town is held from the 1st to the 21st Baisakh.¹¹ There is not any kind of ballad related to the Champavati except that people seek her blessings.

There are brass and silver masks (mohra) of the queen Nenna, but Champavati is worshipped in the form of Durga. It is an idol, not mask. In the case of queen according to myth she voluntarily sacrificed, but in the mythological story of Champavati she got disappeared. During field survey it was found that there was difference in sculptures of Nenna and her daughter Champavati which has been kept in the palace temple. The image of Champavati was of copper whereas of Nenna is a silver motif that has been reported for the first time in Census of India 1961. The temple of queen Nenna was not erected by Sahil Varman despite her sacrifice for the state but Champavati's temple was built by Sahil Varman during his life time only. Later she acquired the status of kul-devi or clan-goddess of the successive ruling kings.

One important narration of the story missed by most of the historians was that king entered with a sword in his hand. How is it not possible that he might have killed his daughter on the pretext of suspicion and spread the story of her disappearance? The suspicious of illicit relationship of her and a voice starting to tell Sahil Verman that 'his child had been taken from him as a punishment. He was further commanded to erect a temple to her on the spot where he stood, to atone for his sin, and avert calamity from his house.' The narration has several tangents. The incident to note down here is not the Champavati alone but the Sadhu also got disappeared with her. Nothing has been explained about the disappearance of Sadhu. It is understood that maintaining harmonious

relations within the household was also brought within the rulers' jurisdiction, with fines being prescribed for defaming or abandoning one's close kinsfolk, and death by burning for killing them.¹² As a father or householder, Sahilvarman's action still cannot be justified.

The king also shown finding the Champavati with sword in his hands, which shows that the story was created in the praise of Sahil Varman not for the Champavati, rather voice which informed about disappearance, provided him the solution to atonement of his action which he did by erecting a temple in the memory of the daughter. But this is surprising again that there is no mention of the Champavati or her temple on any copperplates of Chamba, when she holds the status of the Kuldevi of Chamba Royal family. Though presently Hari Rai temple shares its grant with the Champavati temple, which was given by the Soma Verman and his brother Asata.¹³

In some mythical stories of Champavati, the Sadhu to whom she went for religious conversations is said to be Charpatnath.¹⁴ The ramification of the sect of the Kanphatas in the north- west and beyond the borders of the India, points to Buddhist influences.¹⁵ The evidences, both literary and epigraphic also show the arrival of various religious waves to Chamba. The shift of nucleus from Brahmapura to Chamba, was certainly shift from Shaiva and Shakti to manifestation of Visnu (terrible, that aids in war), converting Champavati as tutelary deity.¹⁶ There is, however, no evidence to either vindicate or compromise such an association.¹⁷ It has also been noticed that the colonization of tribal areas by Brahmans resulted in the rise of bhakti and tantricism that absorbed the cult of tribal mother-goddess.¹⁸ The siddha tradition was noticed in Chamba from the time of Moushan varman.¹⁹ The Panali Nala Rock Inscription, is the first to point to Kashmir influence, as the pundits of that country pronounce e as i in Sanskrit words.²⁰ The details in the inscription very importantly speaks about grandfather of a Brahman who migrated to the region much before 8-9th century.²¹ Thus, the migration did not take place only from Kashmir, rather from lower plains as well.²²

In 1890s, an adaptation of the Suhi ballads was recorded by the Anglican Christian Missionaries, while this adaption narrates plainly the sacrifice sung in Chamba, it adds to the body of the ballads the ways of commemoration and worship by the town girls.²³ In 19th century many of the neighbours' states Kangra and Kulu have their influence on songs or the story, a few songs might have been adopted from Rajasthan. Some Rajas most probably Raja Sham Singh (1873--1904) invited some good singers from Rajasthan on special occasions.²⁴

Conclusion:

The sad story of Champavati today stands at the crossroads with admixture of mythology, story-telling and songs through fair and temple in her memory. Her military acumen remained as backstage act and character assassination through father's suspicion was highlighted without paying attention to the case of disappearance of Charpat sadhu as well. With Mahesh Sharma's challenge to the theory of non-arrival of Charpat in Chamba during 10th century, the vague claim of disappearance of Champavati gets deeper. An incident of the sacrifice of queen Nenna who was the mother of Champavati and subsequent disappearance of the daughter might have raised several questions for sure. To avoid that, Sahil Varman's attempt to build temple seems quite obvious. Later, the stories of sacrifices of mother-daughter duo got wrapped under religious cover and today stands with divinity. As history requires to peep through sources and their interpretation, hence

the story of suspicion, disappearance and temple building of Champavati does not get corroborated through sources. The contemporary women history in and around Chamba proved the increasing influence of Brahmanas in the region and decline in political participation of women. Kalhan's *Rajatarangini* and description of queen Didda's character stands a glaring example to such claim.

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