

Challenges in Restoring Local History: People's Consciousness of History and Heritage Conservation with Special Reference to Nandanagar Chamoli

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of historical consciousness and heritage conservation in the context of a particular locality of Nandanagar block at Chamoli District in Uttarakhand, an area rich in cultural and religious, history. Despite its historical significance, the local populace's approach to preserving and understanding their heritage often remains fragmented and superficial. This is more in regions that lack proper conservation by NGO'S and Govt. bodies. The study critically argues how our historical consciousness is built. In lack of proper sensitization and historical consciousness people fails to acknowledge and restore their true history. Although they utilize local historical remains and buildings to uphold their present identities and social values to an extent that the real history is obscured and certain legends and traditions are taken as reality whose historicity is hard to be proven. They use historical remains to build their popular narrative. This narrative may sound deepening their roots in history? But in actual it is fabricated and imaginary narration, which is often in accordance to their present socio-religious and political needs. The distortion of history is more in case of local history, as most of the local history is not taken as academic work by serious scholar of history. Secondly people in general cannot relate their local history and heritage in accordance to national history or prevailing meta-narrative. Therefore, there is need to develop and shape people's attitudes toward history of locality. By analysing local narratives, community practices, and attitudes towards historical sites, this paper highlights the gaps in the collective memory and the prevailing indifference toward heritage preservation. Thus drawing on fieldwork at Nandanagar area in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, the paper argues to point out importance of local history and public participation in writing and restoring both local history and heritage.

Keywords: Local History, Heritage, Nandanagar, Historical Consciousness.

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Introduction

Everyone and every place have a history and everyone is associated with one or the other historical heritage, but we could notice that (with exception to acknowledged sites, monuments, artifacts, excavation etc.) generally people feel that there is no history or historical heritage around them with which they could relate, feel proud of or something that is worth to be discussed.

Even in some cases when there are some sort of monuments or historical heritage available in the locality yet people do not feel connected with that historical heritage, they do not give importance to them because they feel that these are not really relevant for them. This is more because government and academic bodies have not considered them as important or relevant as historical heritage.

While in a similar location if any historical sites or monuments have socio-religious and economic relevance or are connected to traditions (myth and legends) of the people and locality then it is somehow admired and conserved by them, as being sacred or for being source of economic profit, but people hardly acknowledged them merely for their true historical relevance.

People are more concerned and satisfied to carry mythical identities of their localities rather than acknowledging their past. Specially when they believe that their past is gloomy, it is not on which they actually base their identities. Rather myth and local legends and associated rituals or traditions are by and large more relevant for them for sustaining their local identity formation and to reinstate social hierarchies.^[1]

The other reasons for negligence and disowning history and heritage of any locality is the negligence of the area in national historiography. History is very vast and no single method of historiography can actually record it completely. Moreover, the process of generalization in history, the ideology of the author and the selective use of evidences led to the particular construction of past, expressing a very limited knowledge of history. Therefore, many historical information and evidences remained unused.^[12]

People perceive their local history in relation to the meta-narrative and major events of history, so often if local monuments, sites, artifacts are not interlinked to either the Meta narrative or their notion of history then they hardly consider them as a heritage and as a source of history. This sense of indifference towards history in general is one of the major reasons for the devastation of history and historical heritage of any society.

Writing Local and regional history probably is helpful to overcome such problems. The local and regional historiography can better utilize local evidences, artifacts, monuments and heritage and keep local history alive to a great extent. It can also play an important role in the making of national history, although it should be open to accept discrepancies and differences, if any, in comparison to Meta narrative and popular history without articulating any pretentious ideology.^[3]

Consciousness of history within us is very important for the writing of our local and regional history. Merely knowing the local and regional perspective cannot be considered as

'consciousness of history', the test of our consciousness is that how one can rationally crystallize obscure information and local perspectives into rational history.

We must realize that it is very important, how we value whatever we have as our heritage and how we keep history and heritage alive without any prejudice or any ambiguity. We need to first attach importance to the documentation and conservation of local history at community level.

In this paper we will try to argue the issue of our consciousness of history, through a brief study of Nandanagar block located at Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. It is quite important that the study of local history should be in relation to regional and pan-Indian developments, but it also should be borne in mind that local or regional history are not one and same as history of the nation, the writing of local and regional history should not be devoid of its own distinctive characters.

History of Locality: Nandanagar

There are many places of historical and religious importance in Nandanagar, moreover the Nanda Devi Cult (*Nanda Rajat* carried once in every twelve year and the annual *Nandadevi Lokjat*) represents the religious and cultural heritage of this region. The *Nanda Devi*^[4] cult is believed to be well associated with the process of early state formation in the region. Without any doubt *Nanda* as a deity, as a river and as a mountain is very important aspect of social-religious milieu of the people of Nandanagar. There have been many studies on *Nanda Devi* cult and pilgrimage, so there is no need to discuss it here in detail.



Source: official website of Chamoli District. <https://chamoli.gov.in/map-of-district/>

Image 1: The three red boxes are added on the map to refer 1. Bairaskund is near Village Matai, 2. Ramni, 3. (Nandanagar) Ghat

Interestingly there are many ancient and colonial remnants at Nandanagar block and historically certain trade networks were also passing through Nandanagar block, reflecting its historical vibrancy and importance. Such as

1. Reservoir (*Kund*) and temple located in village *Bairaskund*,
2. temple at Village *Manakhi*
3. temple at village *Lunatara*

4. A stone figurine currently worshiped at *Puniyara Mahdev*
5. Discovery of image of deity *Ganga* from Village *Bhenti*, many temple stones and idols were also found in these above-mentioned locations.
6. American Pentecostal church in village *Ramani* and Local trial cum colonial administrative unit at Village *Bura*.

Apart from this, there are other places of recent religious and cultural importance such as *Nanda Devi* Temple at village *Kurur* and at meadow *Balpata*, *Dwari Devi* cult at village *Lankhi* and *Janmashtami* fest at *Suptal* and *Jhatal* in Village *Bengali* where traditionally locals have been gathering.

The social, cultural and economic importance of these sacred space within locality needs to be understood in relation to the regional history. Yet one can notice that the history of the locality remained obscure in the historiography of both region and nation.

While one can notice that beside Nandanagar in Chamoli, Ancient caves [5], inscriptions [6], temples, buildings, monuments, forts [7], burials [8] etc. have been found from many other places in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, which clearly associate its relation with early human settlements, ancient cultures, local state formations, expansion of regional polities and also interlinking networks that connected the various localities of Chamoli including Nandanagar with the larger trade networks of trans-Himalayas at one hand and northern Indian plains on the other hand especially during colonial period.

So, beyond any doubt specific studies of particular locations have been done. But all this was not Interwoven properly to create history of the locality, one can finds their references in bit and pieces in some research journals and official documentations. The case of Nandanagar (Ghat) is more disheartening as it has potential to develop heritage sites but all went in vain due to total negligence and indifference toward history and heritage of the place.

In the archeological survey report of 1986, it is mentioned that the regional branch of ASI Uttar Pradesh (Pauri Garhwal) led by G. C. Singh and B. P. Badoni Carried a field research work in Ghat area of Chamoli District which is now known as Nandanagar. In this study total thirteen (early-medieval and medieval) temples were discovered with many idols from Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. [9]

A twenty-centimeter image of Ganga was found from one of the villages (*Bhenti*) of Nandanagar, which was styled in *tribhang mudra*. At *Bairaskund* area of Nandanagar many artifacts were discovered along with red ware, terracotta bangles and bricks. *Bairaskund* area was declared to be a site of Kushana period. [10] However currently no such artifacts

are visible or demarcated by archeological survey of India in *Bairaskund* area nor villagers have any local collection and conservation of such artifacts.

Hardly after this ASI report any serious study to further excavate and explore history of the region was done. But to our surprise most shocking was that people are not aware of any such survey and excavation that was done in their localities. There was no pride in being associated to such a historical period. Rather in *Bairaskund* which is part of *Dasoli* Mandal people are more fascinated to the local legend that King *Ravana* has meditated at this place and had sacrificed all his ten (*das*) heads and hence this place is known as *Dasoli*. [11]

An ancient temple is also located in *Bairaskund* which is dedicated to lord *Shiva* some remains of temple, reservoir, idol of *Nandi* in very rudimentary form are still visible at the site. The temple is regularly visited by the locals with special gathering on the day of *Shivratri*. [12]

Along with this, the mark of ancient technique of stone cutting can be noticed on a rock near the temple complex. [13] In popular notion this ten mark on rock are of various fingers of king *Ravana*. Moreover, one of the small idols probably of Sun God is still available in this enclosure [14], which is now popularly worshiped as local deity *Ulka Devi*. [15] (as informed by the locals)

Now if we compare the image of stone cut mark and of old statue that is worshiped as deity *Ulka Devi* with other images of almost similar structure found in different part of India, one can clearly notice that local perception is totally different from historical understanding of these types' structures. It can be said that these historical remains of the temple complex were engrossed by the local in accordance to their recent beliefs to uphold their local tradition. Which scholars have pointed as inventing traditions.

This is also a clear sign of our negligence toward history and proves that certain historical remains that are associated to local traditions are somehow protected. But the negligence of government and NGO's is further to be questioned, as local public hardly treat these historical remains as valuable heritage, the exposure of these artifacts during local ritual and fest cause lot of tempering.



Image 2: 'Amalak' worshiped



Image 3: Stone relic with bell carving worshiped



Image 4: Statue of *Nandi* worshiped

Bairaskund Shivratri Fest 2021



Image 5: *Bairaskund* and temple in the year 2021



Image 6: *Bairaskund* and temple in the year 2018 ^[16]



Image 7: Rock cutting marks. Local believes this are actually marked by the fingers of King *Ravana*



Image 8: Sun God (Popularly known as *Ulka Devi*) ^[17]



Image 9: Rock cutting marks at *Hampi*.



Image 10 and 11: Statue of Sun God ^[18]

On the basis of temple remains at *Bairaskund*, one can point out that apart from one main temple, some small temples were also constructed in the complex. Many *Amalakas* (that are placed under the *Kalash* of *Nagara* style temples) have been found of different proportions at the temple complex. There is a need for further historical research in this area.

Despite the fact that a reservoir and a temple of pre-colonial period is still standing and used, but there is no information about any kind of inscription, royal proclamation and land-grant associated with the temple and the reservoir. No published inscription and document are currently in light to identify these structures. On our enquiry the local inhabitants of the area also denied any land grant to the temple, individual or family by any king or feudal lord. People are unaware of the real history of this temple construction. For them it is basically *tapsthali* of King *Ravana*.

It is believed that, an annual fest was celebrated and the *Bhotia* community was also traditionally engaged in this fair and ritual. It is important to notice that the *Bhotia* community is traditionally associated with the trans-Himalayan trade and there is still a trail from *Bairaskund* to *Ramani* from where one can reach *Tapovan* and *Niti* valley. Although as soon as

this trans-Himalayan trade was closed the nature of participation of the *Bhotia* community and the tradition of the fair have changed a lot. ^[19]

There is a big ground around the temple and the (*kund*) reservoir where a fair is held on the day of *Shivratri*. The *kund* is believed to be auspicious and never dry completely. This fact is further mentioned to point out sacredness of the place. However, if we observe the area, the vast ground around the temple has gentle slopes running from three direction towards the reservoir (*Bairaskund*) in south. It seems that the underground water naturally gathers here, which seeps into the reservoir. However, today underground water has sufficiently decreased and rain is the main source of water for the reservoir.

This space has some other local advantage; therefore, we need to correlate religious-cultural gathering at *Bairaskund* in light of its unique geographical location having various linking trails favoring economic gathering and movements. Probably the temple survived because of its socio-religious importance and the geo-ecological positioning favoring occasional fairs and having trails leading to different trade marts.

While explaining the geo-economic aspect of the region, *Bairaskund* Temple is in Dasoli and it is connected to Nandanagar. It is surrounded by localities attached to *Birhi Ganga* on one side and the localities at river *Nandakani* on the other side and in between one can also track to Nandprayag which is at the point of confluence of river *Alaknanda* and river *Nandakani*. So possibly one can move to various directions and river valleys from *Bairaskund* area.

Temples of early-medieval or medieval period were similarly discovered by Archeological survey team at *Maithna* and *Salkot* situated near the bank of river *Alaknanda* and which are also nearby, *Bairaskund* area, similarly temples were also discovered at Village *Mankhi* and village *Luntara* of Nandanagar block, suggesting that this area has great historical importance as being an active circuit. it was an important socio-political and economic zone over the period in history.

However, the history of these villages is quite missing even from the regional historiography. There are various remains but no identification is done, a case study of the region is thus required by the historians of ancient and early medieval period, especially in the light of the publication of the 1986 Archeological Survey report.

On the other hand, it is quite evident that in colonial period and for many decades of post-independent India, one use to move on foot via local trails from *Bairaskund* area to *Pipalkoti* towards Joshimath, People still today claim that it is nearer for them to visit *Pipalkoti* instead of Karanpryag while walking through trails instead of motorable road. [20]

It seems that there was a trail interlinking *Bairaskund*, *Pipalkoti* and other marts of nearby area on the trade routes towards *Niti* and *Mana* valley, at least in the colonial period. The local people informed that a track from *Bairaksund* to *Ramani* and Curzon Trail is used by the local people specially by the shepherds. [21]

Another important village in Nandanagar Ghat Block that has great historical value but quite neglected in the historiography of region is Village *Ramani*.

According to H. G. Walton, Tapovan was also connected to Lobha Badhangadi through village *Ramani*. [22] It is interesting that every year local participate in *Nandadevi lokjat*, the palanquin of *Nanda Devi* is carried upto Balpata the highest point near *Ramani*. *Balpata* is near cross junction (*Vinayakdhar*) linking different valleys and settlements. Recently a small temple of *Nanda Devi* is constructed at *Balpata*. The *Nandadevi lokjat* is important practice to mark territorial demarcation and revive community privileges connecting villagers, pastoralists and devotees of *Dasholi*, *Nijmola* and *Nandakani* Valley. One can reach *Tapovan*, *Badrinath* and *Niti* valley from *Ramani* Village.

It can be said by observing the geographical location and cultural activities of *Ramani* and *Bairaskund* that they were connected to the trade routes of *Niti-Mana* valleys. Similarly religious rituals were being performed near both the places. It can be said that traditionally the socio-political, economic and cultural aspects of the region were also managed by organizing and participating in local rituals at such sacred spaces.

Emphasizing the economic aspect of the region, A trade route from *Bajnath*, *Almora* to Nandprayag passed through the Nandanagar (Ghat). While village *Ramani* of Nandanagar was an important point on the other route from *Gwaldam* to *Tapovan*. [23] According to Walton, Joshimath was reached from *Ramani* by crossing *Khulra* pass, which was an important point in between *Niti* and *Mana* trade route. [24] The

famously known Lord Curzon Trail (*Kuari Pass*) that connect *Gwaldam*, Nandanagar (*Ghat*) and *Tapovan* was to be visited by Lord Curzon. The track was although already in use, it was just to be upgraded for the comfort of Lord Curzon. This trail passed through *Ramani* village. [25]

Although in the post independent time after the closing of Indo-China trade and with new developments these trails lost its economic importance and was rarely used. so, it was mostly deprived. Even the tourist mostly trails the *kuari* pass from other side instead of following the path from village *Ramani* of Nandanagar. If we keenly notice then we can see that some part of trail which is used to reach *Balpata* is maintained at different stashes to facilitate devotees. Recently some efforts were made to repair this trail. [26] It is their religious zeal that can make them value certain part of the colonial trail. But the larger part which was used for trans Himalayan trade is quite neglected.

But for the local both the name of Lord Curzon and the trail has largely no historical value. Therefore, there has been no conscious demand from the local to conserve its history or to maintain it as heritage, as was the case with the other colonial monuments of the area. To mention few, it is known that there was a bungalow about a mile and half far from the village *Ramani* and later the American Pentecostal Church was also built here. [27] *Ramani* was one among the various outstations of the Christian mission, which had it headquarters at Pauri [28], the remains of the church are still visible at *Ramani*. However, today it is in complete ruin and is not at all connected to the village, it is almost lost in wild flora.

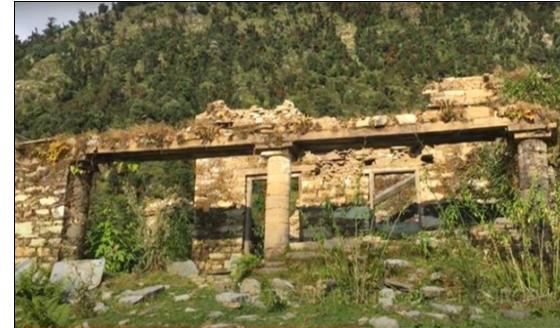


Image 12: American Pentecostal Church [29]

It is believed that there was also a colonial administrative office and an attached detention room in the nearby village (*Bura*), whose present condition is also bad. [30] One can hardly notice any colonial structure at the place. Although the local people have now started to maintain it. But during the discussion with the local Especially with Bhawan Singh (being from *thokdar* family), we came to know that initially the villagers considered the building as symbol of colonial atrocities and for them the presence of such detention room (*kothri*) in village was dangerous, they perceived it to be haunted and unsafe for their children. Therefore, the pit inside was filled and the iron bars were taken away and given to the ironsmith by the village. [31] The statements of the locals were confusing as they claimed it to be previously an administrative seat of local ruler of Tehri Riyasat of Garhwal and later of the colonial officer. The historicity of their fact cannot be proven.

Although they accepted that it was only when certain curious researchers from outside, started to visit the village *Bura* to see the colonial structure, that the villagers of *Bura* realized the potential of the building as a heritage. And now they are trying to portrait it as a possible mark of their village legacy.

[32] Currently the space around the building is used to organize village festivals. Efforts were made to retrieve historical documents to prove historical worth of the building. However,



Images 13,14,15,16,17 and 18: Local administrative, Trial and Detention building at Village Bura [33]

We can notice that the indifference towards the colonial construction resulted in the total ruin of these colonial heritage in the Nandanagar area.

One can notice that various sites, structures and artifacts were not conserved as historical evidence and heritage leading to much devastation of local historical and cultural heritage. What remained as conserved is due to the the sacredness attached to the temples and statue leading to certain restoration of historical remains. However, this restoration was hardly to restore history.

To sum up it is evident that Village *Bairaskund* and village *Ramani* are rural areas at high altitude (2000-2500metre), both have very good agriculture, rich Himalayan vegetation and large open meadows and both receive a good amount of snowfall in winter. Apart from this both the place have mythological or ritualistic importance for the locals, they visit both the places for religious merits. Additionally, both the places have rich historical importance and could have developed history-based heritage tourism, but in both the places the historical heritage was by and large neglected due to which it is not able to attract larger population.

Although people today believe that the important reasons for this failure is lack of proper road networks and mode of transport, tourist from outside hardly visit the area. But one must realize the most serious problem is our attitude towards local history and heritage that actually dwindled its real potential as tourist destination.

Recently when efforts are made to recover local history, to rewrite national history, we must realize that the selective approach and ideology at popular level is rather one of the important reasons for the incomplete ignored history. Restricting ourselves to the Meta narrative could often restrict our gaze on the local history. There is important need to first develop consciousness among the people to value, conserve, and restore history and heritage for its own merits, to an extent that history and heritage are saved irrespective of the fact that it has any economic and sacred means for the society.

they have not succeeded yet. In lack of evidence and deformation of detention room, the historicity of the structure cannot be proven.



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13. Mandir Samiti Bairaskund, Rama Devi (headwomen village Boraon Bairaskund) and Prabaht Purohit, (headman village Hitmoli) see images, 2,3,4 and 5.
14. See Image: 7 photographs taken during field work, 2023, 11-17.
15. See mage:8, photograph taken during field work, 2023, 11-17.
16. Mandir Samiti Bairaskund, Rama Devi (headwomen village Boraon Bairaskund)
17. (Image 6: on left) Jagaran.com/Uttarakhand, Raksha Panthari 19/10/2018. (old pic for comparison)
18. Images taken during field work 2022, 2023. (by Dr. Deepak Kumar)
19. Image 9: <https://hampi.in/rock-cutting> and Images 10, 11: www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/en/collections <https://sculpturepedia.com/sculptures/surya-at-indian-museum-of-kolkata/>, <https://indianculture.gov.in/arteifacts-museums/surya>.
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