

SACRED RELICS OF HANGPATH: A STUDY OF THE SHIVALINGA AND YONI-PEETHA IN SOUNDER, DACHHAN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the sacred relics at Hangpath, located near Sounder village in the Dachhan, Kishtwar region of Jammu and Kashmir. Focusing on a historically significant Shivalinga and Yoni-Peetha discovered by local inhabitants, the research offers new insights into the region's Shaivite traditions. Using on-field observations, oral histories, and comparative iconographic analysis, this research examines the stylistic features and ritual symbolism of the Yoni-Peetha and its associated Shivalingas. Despite their potential archaeological and cultural value, these relics have remained unexplored by formal agencies and are preserved solely by the devotion of the local community. This article focuses on the Hangpath findings within the broader trajectory of Shaivism in the Greater Himalayas, arguing that they may be part of a larger, undiscovered temple complex. Furthermore, this paper discusses the ritual significance of the site, its sociocultural role in Sounder village, and the need for systematic archaeological intervention. Ultimately, this study calls for an urgent reevaluation of heritage preservation strategies in Jammu and Kashmir to protect these sacred relics for future generations.

KEYWORDS

Hangpath, Shivalingas, Yoni-Peetha, Shaivism, Jhalarni, Copper coins, Shaivism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Hangpath site, located in Sounder village within the Dachhan, Kishtwar region of Jammu and Kashmir, represents a significant yet largely undocumented center of Shaivite tradition. Within this picturesque Himalayan landscape, local inhabitants have preserved sacred relics that evoke centuries of religious history and ritual practice. Foremost among these relics are a cluster of Shivalingas and an intricately carved Yoni-Peetha, which together reflect the enduring Shaivite heritage of the region. Despite the significant cultural and spiritual value of these relics, Hangpath has remained absent from formal archaeological surveys and scholarly literature. This neglect is symptomatic of the broader challenges facing cultural heritage management in remote mountainous areas, where sacred traditions persist outside the ambit of state-led preservation and research initiatives.

Shaivism in the Jammu region is rich, complex, and deeply intertwined with the socio-religious fabric of its rural communities. Historical accounts and folk traditions alike indicate that villages such as Sounder have served as guardians of ancient Shaivite customs, performing ritual practices such as community feasts, pilgrimages, and the ceremonial bathing (Abhiṣeka) of the Shivalingas. According to local legend, these particular Shivalingas were unearthed during agricultural activity approximately 50–60 meters from their current site. Farmers working the

land accidentally uncovered these ancient stones, revered by the locals as Jhalarni, a term signifying their sacredness and presumed link to Shiva and Sakti. The community subsequently donated a portion of their agricultural land to house the relics, where they constructed a temple that remains in active use to this day.

Although small in scale, this sacred complex encapsulates much larger historical processes that shaped religion across the Himalayan interior. The early medieval period (8th–14th century CE), during which similar Yoni-Peetha and Shivalingas were often crafted, was a transformative era for temple culture in Jammu and Kashmir. Stone, wood, and clay temple forms proliferated during this period under imperial patronage and local chieftains, creating a widespread temple-building tradition that extended into the rural peripheries. The stylistic features of the Hangpath Yoni-Peetha, from its molded base to its ritual spout (Soma Sutra), resonate with this regional canon, suggesting its affiliation with early Shiva ritual architecture.

Yet, despite these indications, Hangpath and its relics have not been subjected to scholarly scrutiny. The absence of formal archaeological surveys by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Jammu and Kashmir Department of Archives, Archaeology, and Museums represents a significant gap in the historical and archaeological record of the region. Oral histories, testimonies of residents, and comparative stylistic analysis all suggest that Hangpath may once have been the site of a larger Shaivite temple complex, possibly accompanied by other ritual stones, copper coin hoards, and engraved scriptures, tantalizing clues that merit systematic excavation.

The findings discussed herein not only add a new chapter to the historical and religious topography of Jammu and Kashmir but also raise questions about the ways sacred spaces continue to evolve in dialogue with their natural surroundings, local myths, and contemporary community engagements. At a time when the tension between modernity and tradition is acutely felt in these rural areas, Hangpath and its sacred relics offer a poignant example of cultural resilience and the enduring power of spiritual heritage to anchor communal identity.

2. SACRED GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF DACHHAN

Dachhan, located about 70 kilometers from the district Kishtwar in Jammu and Kashmir, is a picturesque Himalayan valley bounded by Kargil to the north, Marwah to the west, Paddar and Machail to the east, and Kishtwar to the south. Extending from Ekhala to Hanzal, the region is rich in lush meadows, dense forests, and waterfalls, creating a captivating landscape. A defining geographical feature of Dachhan is the Marusudar River, also called Vridh Maru in Rigvedic hymns, which is a significant tributary of the Chenab. (Bakshi, 2008, p. 48). The Marusudar nourishes the valley's fertile flora and fauna before merging with the Chenab at Bhandarkut. Supporting this watercourse are three vital streams, Kiyar Nala, Anant Nala, and Kibber Nala, that sustain local agriculture, wildlife, and traditional livelihoods. Throughout Dachhan, sacred springs and shrines are scattered across hillsides, reflecting the community's deep spiritual ties to the environment. Its geographical isolation and natural wealth have preserved both cultural traditions and biodiversity. Dachhan's serene terrain, vibrant water bodies, and revered sacred sites make it a landscape of immense ecological, historical, and cultural importance in the region.

Dachhan, nestled in the Himalayan landscape of Kishtwar in Jammu and Kashmir, is revered for its spiritual and historical richness. Its serene isolation and natural grandeur have long made it a sacred sanctuary for sages and ascetics. Traditional accounts, supported by scholarly research, suggest that Dachhan was not merely a place of meditation but a cradle of Hindu textual traditions, with parts of the *Rig Veda* and *Atharva Veda* believed to have been compiled in its

caves.(Prashant, 28 July 1985)Bathistal Cave, associated with Kunti Mata and the Pandavas' legendary wanderings, stands as one of the most evocative sites in the valley, connecting the region to the epic era (Mahabharata Period).(Kak, 1924) Beyond Bathistal, Dachhan features sacred Shivlings and Yoni-Peethas at Sounder.(Singh D. A., 2025, pp. 67-68), Bhim Ka Jharna waterfall, Pandav Daijan, the historic Kaikut Temple, rock inscriptions at Sirchi, and goddess shrines like Virat Mata Temple. (Singh A. , 2021) Kaikut Temple in Kath-kuni style is a unique architectural treasure of Dachhan, a historical and culturally significant temple located in Dachhan, specifically near the Hudh Mata Shakti Peetha. (Singh D. A., 2025) These sacred landmarks, steeped in Shaivite and Shakta traditions, highlight Dachhan's profound spiritual and cultural heritage. Despite its significance, the valley remains underexplored by historians and archaeologists. Preserving these sites and documenting their stories is vital for appreciating Dachhan's role in shaping India's religious, historical, and cultural identity across centuries.

2.1. Historical Influences on Shaivism

From the 8th and 12th centuries CE, Northern India experienced a significant expansion of Shaivism, facilitated by royal patronage and the itinerant nature of ascetic orders. In Kashmir, this religious movement reached an advanced philosophical stage through the works of thinkers like Vasugupta and Abhinavagupta, who laid the foundations of Kashmir Shaivism—an intellectually sophisticated and esoteric tradition that cohesive metaphysics, epistemology, and ritual practice. These philosophical developments were not confined to Kashmir alone; their influence is believed to have extended into the surrounding Himalayan hill territories (Muller-Ortega, 1989) including regions such as Dachhan in present-day Jammu and Kashmir.

However, Shaivism in Dachhan evolved in a more localized and popular form. It did not assimilate the abstract metaphysical concepts of Kashmir Shaivism. Instead, it manifested through village-based ritual practices, often centered around the worship of Shiva in fierce forms such as Bhairava, along with a pantheon of local guardian deities associated with specific clans or natural sites. These traditions represented a synthesis of Vedic and Tantric elements. Vedic mantras were often chanted alongside Tantric rites, particularly in rituals centered around sacred springs (kunds) and Shivalingams, natural or crafted forms that symbolize Shiva. Such consecrated geography and the continuity of oral traditions have contributed to the preservation of these regional Shaivite practices, which remain vital to the spiritual identity of the local population.

2.2. Role of Temples and Pilgrimage Routes

Temples and pilgrimage routes hold a central place in Hindu religious practice, serving not only as spaces of individual devotion but also as vital nodes of collective cultural identity. In Hinduism, temples are considered earthly abodes of deities, where the divine presence is ritually invoked and maintained through daily worship (puja), festivals, and community gatherings. Pilgrimage (tirtha-yatra), meanwhile, is a sacred journey undertaken to connect with spiritual centers believed to be infused with divine energy. These practices foster both spiritual merit (punya) and social cohesion across regions.

In the late medieval period, temple culture had begun to flourish across the hilly landscapes of Jammu, supported by local chieftains, landlords, merchant guilds, and village communities. In Dachhan, temples were constructed in nearly every settlement, reflecting the region's deepening religious identity and its enduring connection to Shaivite and Shakta traditions. Notable examples include Radhakrishna Temple and Kalika Mata Temple in Sounder; Shiv Temple in Kalnoo; Santoshi Mata Temple in Loharna; Shiv Temple and Kali Mata Temple in Suid; Shiv Temple and Hudh Mata Temple at Anantnalla; Virat Mata Temple and Ram Temple in Dilogoot; and Shiv

Temples at Pandav Daijan and Janakpur. Other significant sites include Durga Mata Temple at Panjdihara; Shiv Temples in Resri, Prangus, and Tundar; Kali Mata Temple, Durga Mata Temple, and Kalish Temple; as well as Turi Kul Temple. In Lopara, important religious sites comprise Ram Temple, Shiv Temple, and the Kuldevta Temple of Dai Raz. In Bhatpura, the sacred landscape includes Kali Mata Temple, Shiv Temple, Ram Temple, and Bhawani Mata Temple. In Chicha, major religious sites include Rishar Nag and Rudhar Nag shrines, Kartik Swami Temple, and Maha Kali Temple, all of which are central to local devotional practices and seasonal rituals. These temples, often constructed from locally sourced stone and deodar wood, not only function as centers of worship but also serve as vital spaces for community gathering, ritual continuity, and cultural cohesion across generations in the Dachhan Valley.

Over time, Dachhan also became part of broader regional pilgrimage circuits. Seasonal pilgrimages, such as the Hudh Mata Trisandhya Yatra, connected the valley to other important Shaivite and Shakta shrines across the Dachhan Valley. Nag worship, a vibrant aspect of local religious life, is practiced at sites like Lem Nag in Lopara, Dhanvay Nag in Kiyar, Brahma Sarovar yatra in Kibbar, Zardhoor yatra in Kalnoo and the Chaar Nag in Janakpur. Oral traditions and local myths express of antique sages and ascetics who once roamed these hills, consecrating natural springs and stones that later became ritual centers. These sacred sites and pilgrimage routes have played a vital role not only in preserving regional forms of Shaivism but also in fostering cultural continuity, social cohesion, and economic interaction among the hill communities of Dachhan.

2.3. Folk Rituals, Oral Histories, and Divine Discovery

The continued vitality of Shaivism in Dachhan is evident in its folklore, festivals, oral myths, and ritual feasts. A common pattern observed across Himalayan villages is the periodic “discovery” or “revelation” of sacred relics, usually stones or images unearthed by farmers, which are subsequently installed and worshipped as Shivalingas (Verma, 2017). The findings at Hangpath fit into this pattern. Oral histories from Sounder recount how the Shivalinga and Yoni-Peetha emerged during agricultural activity, viewed by locals as a divine sign, much like other Svayambhu (self-originated) lingams in the region. Such episodes highlight the interplay between material culture and myth, where sacred stones and pedestals do not require royal patronage or textual authentication to attain religious status. Instead, their holiness is confirmed by communal recognition and sustained through everyday acts of reverence, including offerings of water and milk, lighting of lamps, and the staging of collective Bhandaras (communal feasts). This vernacular religious culture emphasizes the spiritual autonomy of Dachhan’s communities and their capacity to establish sacred sites rooted in local epistemologies.

The historical and cultural context of the Dachhan region situates Hangpath as part of a living archive of rural Shaivism, one that integrates centuries of ritual practice with the sacred geography of hills and streams. Despite minimal royal sponsorship or literary codification, the traditions at Sounder testify to a continuity of devotion that bridges past and present. Recognizing this historical depth provides a crucial lens for interpreting the Yoni-Peetha and Shiva lingams at Hangpath highlights the need for careful scholarly attention to such seemingly modest yet profoundly significant sacred spaces.

3. DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THE SHIVALINGA AND YONI-PEETHA AT HANGPATH

The sacred relics unearthed at Hangpath, comprising multiple Shiva lingams and a well-crafted Yoni-Peetha, embody a significant material testimony to Shaivism’s long and localized historical

continuity in the Dachhan region. This section provides a detailed archaeological and iconographic description of these relics, examining their stylistic features, ritual design, and religious symbolism. Furthermore, it examines how their materiality and morphology reflect regional temple traditions and vernacular observances of devotion.

3.1. Discovery and Relocation

According to oral tradition, the Shivalingas and their Yoni-Peetha were revealed during agricultural activity on an adjoining slope near Sounder village. Farmers working the soil described how these stones emerged after they dug into unusually compact layers of earth. Identified by the locals as Jhalarni, a regional term signifying sacred stones revealed through divine will, these relics were excavated with great reverence. Recognizing their sacrality, the landowners of Kalnoo dedicated approximately five kanals of their land for the sacred purpose and entrusted the relics to the local community.

The Yoni-Peetha were then carefully relocated to a nearby temple plot adjacent to the Kalika Mata Temple, and subsequently, Shivalingas were enshrined near the helipad at Draman. Here, a small open temple was constructed to house them properly and facilitate their ritual use as a continuing locus of Shaiva worship. Importantly, this relocation itself reflects a traditional ritual practice: newly revealed sacred stones must be ‘awakened’ through consecratory rites (*pratiṣṭha*), then preserved in a sanctuary where they can be regularly abhisheka, worshipped, and maintained as part of community devotion.



Hangpath Shivalingas

3.2. Typology of the Shivalingas

The Shivalingas at Hangpath, three in total, are smooth, elongated stones of different sizes. Unlike highly polished and intricately sculpted Linga shapes produced in the early medieval era, these stones appear to retain much of their natural form, with minimal human intervention

beyond basic shaping of the top and base. This feature corresponds closely to the tradition of Svayambhu (self-originated) Shivalingas, which are revered precisely because they are understood to have manifested through natural processes.

Some scholars argue that such Svayambhu lingams may represent very early or even pre-Brahmanical phases of Shiva worship, preserving an ancient animistic belief in sacred stones as dwelling places of divinity (Kramrisch, 1981). Oral histories gathered from local devotees also support this view, narrating that these stones were ‘found as they are,’ bearing the mark of the divine without visible human sculpting. Whether consciously shaped or entirely natural, the lingams’ ritual use, regularly bathed and adorned with flowers and lamps, places them at the heart of the living tradition of Shiva worship in Soudur.

3.3. Morphology and Iconography of the Yoni-Peetha

The Yoni-Peetha is shaped from a single block of fine-grained stone, most likely granite or a durable sandstone, common to local quarrying practices. The Peetha features a rectangular base with a slightly raised border, surrounding a gently sloped surface. The most defining feature is its circular central cavity, designed to cradle a Sivalingam, and an incised soma-sutra, a spout-like projection running along one side of the base. The soma-sutra ensured that ritual libations of milk, water, ghee, and other offerings (*abhisheka-dravya*) could flow smoothly away from the Linga, often into a designated collection vessel or the sacred ground.

Although the front portion of the spout is slightly damaged, the overall structure of the Peetha is intact. Its stylistic profile reveals its continuity with other Yoni-Peethas of the region. Unlike the ornately sculpted pedestals of classical urban temples, the Hangpath Yoni-Peetha emphasizes utility and sacred symbolism over decorative flourishes, a typical trait of rural Himalayan Shaiva shrines, where ritual efficacy took precedence over monumental aesthetics.



Hangpath Yoni-Peetha

3.4. Ritual Design and Symbolism

Together, the Sivalingam and Yoni-Peetha form the quintessential emblem of Shaivism, representing the dynamic unity of Siva (Purusha) and Sakti (Prakrit). The Yoni denotes the fertile, generative matrix of the cosmos, while the Lingam signifies the stable, transcendental essence of Śiva. This ritual architecture is not merely symbolic; it encodes a cosmological understanding that pervades every level of village religious practice. Every pouring of water, every circumambulation, and every offering of food or light re-enacts the creative interplay of male and female cosmic principles, allowing devotees to participate in the sacred cycle of creation, sustenance, and dissolution.

The soma-sutra (libation spout) in the Hangpath Peetha also assumes theological significance. Ritual texts describe the outflow of water from the Sivalingam as a sanctified current bearing blessings (*tirtha*) into the surrounding world. Local practice at Hangpath reaffirms this belief; devotees direct the spout toward a nearby sacred stone or tree, allowing the offerings to nourish the spirits of the land and foster agricultural prosperity. This practice integrates ritual worship into the agrarian economy of Sounder, further reinforcing Shaivism's deep embeddedness in the valley's rural life.

3.5. Chronological and Stylistic Considerations

While there is as yet no formal epigraphic or material analysis that can firmly date the Hangpath relics, stylistic parallels with other Shaiva monuments in Jammu and Kashmir offer tentative chronological clues. The overall form of the Yoni-Peetha, with its plain base and functional spout, bears a close resemblance to specimens dated to the early to late medieval period (c. 8th–14th century CE), especially those at Sudhmahadev and Bhillawar (Bamzai, 1973) (Raina, 2002). The absence of elaborate carvings and inscriptions further suggests that the Hangpath Yoni-Peetha may have been produced in a vernacular context outside royal patronage networks, possibly crafted by local artisans.

More precise dating awaits further interdisciplinary research. Future scholars could employ petrographic analysis, thermoluminescence dating, or even examine surrounding soil strata for cultural material that can establish a clearer timeframe. Given the significance of the discovery, these relics deserve methodical archaeological attention that could place them within a firm chronological sequence and perhaps even trace their cultural links to broader Shaiva movements across the Himalayas.

3.6. The Site as a Continuum of Ritual Life

Hangpath is not a relic in isolation; it is part of a living ritual landscape. The Shivalingas and Peetha have been seamlessly integrated into ongoing community religious practice, as witnessed in the seasonal fairs and daily worship conducted by villagers. The liturgical life surrounding these relics reinforces their status as more than archaeological artifacts: they are still venerated as vibrant conduits of divine power, ensuring the continuity of Shaiva practice in Sounder. By comparing their historical lineage with the vibrant present, we recognize Hangpath as a dynamic sacred complex, a bridge across centuries of devotion.

4. RITUAL SIGNIFICANCE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The sacred relics at Hangpath, comprising the Shivalingas and the Yoni-Peetha, are not simply material remains from a previous era; they are active focal points of ritual, pilgrimage, and

communal life. Despite the absence of state-sponsored preservation or formal priesthood, it is the sustained involvement of the local Sounder community that has ensured these relics remain integral to the region's spiritual landscape. This section explores the ritual practices surrounding Hangpath, the role of oral traditions and village custodians, and the broader significance of these sacred stones for cultural continuity in the Dachhan region.

4.1. Ritual Practices and Cycles of Worship

In Sounder and neighboring villages, ritual practices at Hangpath follow a periodic and agrarian calendar, integrating seasonal transitions, agricultural rites, and local festivals with Shiva devotion. Shivratri, the most prominent festival in Shaivism, is celebrated with particular fervor at Hangpath. On this day, villagers come together to cleanse the Shivalingas and Yoni-Peetha, anointing them with water, milk, honey, ghee, and aromatic oils. Pradakṣiṇa (circumambulation) and bhajans (devotional songs) last into the night, invoking Śiva as the divine ascetic who is simultaneously present in the fertile hills and flowing rivers.

Beyond Mahashivratri, regular weekly worship on Mondays and new/full moon days (Amavasya and Purnima) highlights the relics' continuing ritual salience. Every gathering involves the lighting of earthen lamps, the tying of sacred red threads to nearby trees, and the sharing of prasada, sanctified food, among all present. Devotees believe these offerings facilitate Shiva's grace upon crops, livestock, and the health of village residents.

4.2. Bhandaras and Collective Feasts

A distinctive feature of Hangpath's ritual culture is the tradition of Bhandaras. community feasts are sponsored collectively by village households. Unlike commercial or temple-centered festivals in urban areas, these feasts are entirely grassroots affairs, sustained by contributions of rice, vegetables, milk, ghee, and other staples grown or gathered by local families. Organized after significant agricultural milestones (such as sowing and harvesting) or in fulfillment of vows (*manats*), Bhandaras embody the communal spirit of service (*seva*) and mutual reciprocity that lie at the heart of rural Shaivism.

During Bhandaras, food is cooked on open hearths near the temple, and offerings are first made to the Shivalingams before being distributed among all present, from elders to children and visiting pilgrims. Oral testimonies from Sounder describe these feasts as occasions that reaffirm social bonds across clan lines and foster a sense of shared identity rooted in sacred tradition. The very act of preparing and sharing food under the gaze of Shiva is understood as a sacramental practice, reinforcing the belief that the divine is present in the community and its everyday labors.

4.3. Oral Histories and Mythic Narratives

Community engagement with Hangpath is also shaped by oral histories, myths, and local hagiographies that circulate within Sounder and its neighboring villages. Shivalingams emerged from their concurrence, Svayambhu, making Hangpath a kind of primal tirtha (sacred ford) that requires ongoing stewardship. These stories imbue the site with a blessed temporality, where past and present coexist and where divine forces continue to intervene in village life.

By transmitting these narratives across generations, the community preserves not only a historical memory of Hangpath but also its ritual authority. Oral histories emphasize the moral obligations of the custodians, inhabitants, and other local clans, who have inherited the task of safeguarding and venerating the stones. This stewardship is less formalized than in institutional temple

contexts; yet, precisely because it is distributed across households and village elders, it is also remarkably resilient.

4.4. Community Agency and Informal Conservation

The continued reverence at Hangpath highlights a critical insight: heritage need not depend on the state apparatus to endure. In the absence of formal recognition or intervention by agencies like the Archaeological Survey of India or local heritage departments, Sounder's residents have acted as informal conservators, maintaining and protecting the site through ritual repetition, regular upkeep of the shrine area, and oral advocacy. It is this grassroots guardianship that has prevented the complete obscuration of the relics.

That said, villagers also express concern about the long-term vulnerabilities facing the site, specifically in light of developmental pressures such as helipad construction and the absence of protective legislation. Many believe that formal archaeological attention and state-sponsored conservation would not only safeguard the relics physically but also affirm their cultural significance, ensuring that they continue to inspire devotion and identity for future generations.

5. BROADER ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL IMPLICATIONS

The sacred relics at Hangpath, while modest in scale and rural in character, have far-reaching archaeological and historical significance that extends beyond their immediate ritual context. Situated in the Dachhan region, archaeologically overlooked by mainstream research, these findings open up new avenues for understanding the evolution of Shiva worship, patterns of settlement, and cultural exchange across the Himalayan peripheries. They also illuminate how sacred sites persist in local memory despite centuries of political and environmental change.

5.1. Reassessing Early Shaiva Influence in the Himalayan Peripheries

Historically, scholarship on Indian Shaivism has concentrated on royal centers such as Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, and Varanasi, where grand stone temples and scriptural traditions attracted royal patronage and scholarly attention (Kramrisch, 1981)(Dyczkowski, 1987). However, rural shrines like Hangpath suggest a more widespread and grassroots diffusion of Shaivism into mountainous areas beyond established centers. Even if modest in scale, these sites may have once served as ritual hubs and pilgrimage stops, linking local communities to larger Shaiva networks across the Western Himalayas.

The stylistic and material features of the Hangpath Yoni-Peetha and Shivalinga also imply that Shaiva traditions were well-established in rural Dachhan by the early medieval period, as similar pedestals, lingams, and ritual spouts have been documented at prominent shrines like Sudhmahadev(Raina, 2002). This suggests that, alongside the monumental architecture celebrated in urban contexts, vernacular forms of Shaiva practice thrived, evolving in tandem with agricultural cycles and local myths. Hence, Hangpath and its relics potentially represent a localized chapter of the larger historical trajectory of Shaiva worship, making them important data points for understanding Saivism's regional plurality.

5.2. Indicators of Historical Settlement and Ritual Continuity

The discovery of copper coins, fragments of sacred stones, and traces of other material culture at Hangpath and its surrounding landscape points to sustained human activity over centuries. Oral histories describe the stones as Svayambhu, but the very presence of nearby coinage and ancient

stone fragments suggests that the site may have also witnessed early ritual, temple aids, or trade connections. Copper coins are often found alongside pilgrimage routes and might indicate the role of Hangpath as a sacred destination where devotees left offerings.



Hangpath Copper Coins

The discovery of copper coin hoards alongside Shivalingas and Yoni-Peetha at the Hangpath site suggests that this location was not only a sacred religious center but also held economic significance in the past. In the context of early and medieval Indian history, coin hoards often indicate patterns of trade, pilgrimage activity, or offerings made at temples. The presence of Shivalingas and Yoni-Peetha signifies ritual worship associated with Shaivism, and the accompanying coins may have been part of votive offerings made by devotees seeking divine blessings. Such findings underscore the multifaceted role of religious sites in ancient Indian society, where spiritual, cultural, and economic functions were frequently intertwined. The use of copper coins, a common medium of exchange during various dynastic periods, also helps in tentatively dating the site or creating its period of active use. Together, these discoveries underscore the archaeological potential of Hangpath and reinforce the need for systematic excavation and scholarly documentation.

Additionally, local infrastructure evolved and new religious sites emerged, Hangpath persisted as a node of continuity, suggesting a centuries-long ritual landscape shaped by the enduring presence of these relics. This continuity highlights the archaeological palimpsest of the region, where past and present practices coalesce around sacred stones.

5.3. Local Agency and Heritage Conservation

A central implication of the Hangpath case lies in the role of local agency in conserving these sacred relics. Communities across rural Jammu, particularly in Sounder and Dachhan, have taken on the stewardship of their sacred pasts without formal recognition or financial support. Oral histories, ritual practices, and the upkeep of the shrine site attest to a grassroots mode of heritage management that thrives outside mainstream bureaucratic structures. This challenges conventional assumptions that material conservation must necessarily be top-down and highlights the need for more participatory heritage policies that recognize indigenous expertise and community rights.

At the same time, local custodians call attention to the fragility of this grassroots conservation. Increased exposure due to military construction and local tourism raises concerns about the relics' long-term protection. Given the lack of formal archaeological scrutiny at Hangpath, state bodies and scholars must collaborate with local communities to facilitate ethical excavation, careful documentation, and sustainable conservation, allowing the region to balance progress with the preservation of its sacred landscape.

6. CONSERVATION CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite its profound historical, cultural, and religious significance, the sacred site of Hangpath faces a range of pressing conservation challenges. These threats, compounded by a lack of formal recognition and limited material support, risk the integrity and endurance of this heritage for future generations. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced strategy that integrates archaeological expertise, community engagement, and sustainable heritage management.

6.1. Lack of Formal Archaeological and Institutional Support

A primary issue confronting Hangpath is the absence of any formal archaeological survey, excavation, or documentation. Unlike prominent Shaivism centers that benefit from state-backed initiatives, Hangpath's relics remain outside the purview of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and local heritage bodies. This has left the site reliant entirely on local stewardship, a noble and historically effective practice, yet one that is lacking in the face of modern environmental and developmental pressures. Without systematic academic intervention and state recognition, there is a significant risk that vital historical data will remain unexplored or may even be destroyed before it can be properly studied.

6.2. Environmental and Developmental Pressures

Hangpath's fragile landscape is vulnerable to erosion, extreme weather, and, increasingly, human encroachment. The establishment of a helipad at nearby Draman and ongoing agricultural expansion pose particular threats to the site's stability. Vibrations from heavy machinery, unplanned construction, and seasonal water runoff may cause further structural damage to the Yoni-Peeṭha and nearby Shivalinga. Without proactive measures to manage these stressors, the gradual deterioration of these sacred stones is inevitable.

6.3. Material Vulnerabilities and Lack of Conservation Techniques

While carved from durable local stone, the relics at Hangpath have already shown visible wear. Micro-cracks, water infiltration, and biological growth, such as moss and lichen, are actively weakening the surface of the Yoni-Peeṭha and the surrounding Shivalingas. At present, there are no protective barriers or conservation treatments in place to prevent further degradation. Expert-led assessments, including material analysis, stabilization treatments, and climate-proofing measures, are urgently required to arrest further damage.

6.4. Strengthening Community-Centered Stewardship

Recognizing the immense cultural commitment of Sounder's residents is central to any long-term preservation plan. This community has already demonstrated effective informal management through ritual upkeep and periodic cleaning of the shrine precinct. Harnessing this existing structure of stewardship would ensure that future interventions remain culturally sensitive and socially sustainable. Training local custodians in basic preservation techniques, creating awareness campaigns, and facilitating periodic consultations with heritage professionals could bolster the site's long-term safety while upholding its ritual sanctity.

7. CONCLUSION

The sacred relics of Hangpath, comprising the Shivalingas and the Yoni-Peeṭha, are more than archaeological or religious curiosities; they serve as vital links in the historical and spiritual

continuum that shapes the Dachhan Valley and its communities. This research has highlighted how these stones are not merely isolated material remains but living symbols of Shaivism, sustained by local ritual practices, oral histories, and deep communal reverence. Throughout the article, we have examined Hangpath's significance across multiple dimensions: its historical evolution within the broader landscape of Himalayan Shaivism, its theological symbolism, its present-day ritual role in the Sounder community, and its potential contributions to academic research into early temple traditions in the region. Despite centuries of political, social, and environmental change, Hangpath endures as a sacred landscape that integrates the cosmic principles of Shiva and Shakti into the rhythms of rural life. The relics' informal discovery during agricultural activity, their careful relocation and enshrinement by villagers, and their continued use in seasonal rites and feasts all exemplify the profound connection between this community and its sacred past. Moreover, as comparative scholarship on vernacular Shaivism and rural pilgrimage traditions indicates, Hangpath fits into a larger pattern of Svayambhu discoveries across the Himalayan and sub-Himalayan regions, sites where natural stones and rustic pedestals are recognized and ritualized as powerful loci of divine presence.

Yet the value of Hangpath lies not only in its past or present, but also in its future. Given its cultural and historical significance, this sacred complex deserves a thoughtful, multi-stakeholder conservation strategy that acknowledges both its tangible and intangible dimensions. The current absence of formal archaeological scrutiny and state recognition is troubling; without immediate action, the site is vulnerable to gradual deterioration due to weathering, human activity, and a lack of protective measures. Conservation cannot be imposed as an external process; it must arise from a respectful dialogue that includes local custodians and integrates their centuries-old stewardship practices with archaeological and conservation expertise.

In this regard, Hangpath offers significant potential as a case study for balancing the preservation of physical structures with the safeguarding of intangible cultural traditions. Its narrative emphasizes the need for policies that regard sacred spaces as dynamic, community-centered entities rather than fixed monuments frozen in time. Moreover, it raises a broader question of what qualifies as "heritage" in India's diverse cultural landscape, where village shrines and agrarian ritual cycles can carry as much historical and cultural depth as grand architectural monuments.

The Shivalingas and Yoni-Peetha of Hangpath are more than ancient stones; they are vessels of collective memory, ritual continuity, and historical knowledge that deserve a prominent place in the scholarly and conservation agenda for Jammu and Kashmir. By engaging in interdisciplinary research, respectful collaboration with local custodians, and sustained conservation efforts, scholars and heritage managers can ensure that Hangpath not only survives as a sacred relic of the past but also thrives as a dynamic locus of cultural vitality for future generations.

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