



Original Article

A Human Geographical Perspective on Naga Saints and Aghoris in Comparison with Common People

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Abstract

In this essay, the distinctive spatial practices and cultural identities of the Naga Saints and Aghoris are compared with those of the general public from a human geographical point of view. Sacred and transitional spaces like cremation sites, pilgrimage routes, and festival gatherings like the Kumbh Mela are inhabited by Naga Saints and Aghoris, in contrast to the settled geographies of everyday society, which are based on family, livelihood, and urban-rural networks. Their ritual austerities, ash-smearing, nudity, and interaction with death symbols reinterpret the body, space, and spirituality, offering a counter-geography of life. In contrast to ascetics, who create symbolic landscapes focused on transcendence, renunciation, and liberation, common people create landscapes for social continuity and economic survival, the study shows. Two different ways of living space, place, and identity are depicted by this contrast: one based on spiritual pursuits, the other on material sustenance. Moreover, the societal view of saints and Aghoris fluctuates between awe, terror, and interest, illustrating their equivocal place in cultural contexts. This paper challenges conventional ideas of settlement, belonging, and social life by placing ascetic practices within the larger context of human geography and demonstrating how Naga Saints and Aghoris represent alternative spatial orders.

Keywords: Human Geography, Naga Saints, Aghoris, Common People, Lifestyle.

Introduction

Ordinary human settlements and extraordinary ascetic traditions coexist in India's cultural geography. Aghoris and Naga Saints are examples of ascetic groups that create distinct spatial and cultural geographies by renouncing worldly ties, while common people live within the framework of family, society, and economy. By using human geography to compare these groups, we can see how geography affects their resource use, living conditions, and social interactions.

India's geography is characterized by its spiritual traditions in addition to its physical characteristics. The combination of religion, space, and society is embodied by ascetics like Aghoris and Naga Sadhus. Their presence reflects a spatial dimension of asceticism and faith and is closely associated with rivers, forests, cremation grounds, and pilgrimage sites.

The Naga Saints: Who Are They?

Traditionally connected to Shaivism, the Naga Saints are a group of militant ascetics. "Naga," which means "naked," is a symbol of renunciation. The Himalayan regions and pilgrimage sites like Haridwar, Nashik, Prayagraj, and Ujjain are where they are most commonly observed, especially during the Kumbh Mela. Their settlements are situated geographically close to riverbanks and pilgrimage routes, where they serve as spiritual mentors and dharma guardians.

Identify the Aghoris.?

The Aghoris are a Shaivite sect closely linked with Kashi (Varanasi) and cremation grounds along the Ganga River. They embrace behaviors that are frequently regarded as taboo, challenging traditional social and religious norms. Their topography is strongly associated with river ghats, forests, and smashanas (cremation sites). Aghoris tend to be solitary, meditating in remote settings, in contrast to the Naga Saints, who are visible during public ceremonies.

Who are the Common People?

In this study, common people refers to the general population living in permanent settlements such as villages, towns, and cities. Unlike ascetic groups who renounce family and material life, common people remain engaged in social, economic, and cultural systems.

Their lives are centered on:

Family and Community: Living within kinship networks, caste, and social structures.

Economic Activity: Participation in farming, trade, business, industry, and services.

Food Systems: Diet shaped by agriculture, regional cuisines, markets, and cultural traditions.

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Settlement Patterns: Permanent houses, villages, and cities, often influenced by geography and economy.

Lifestyle: Education, work, technology, festivals, and cultural practices, reflecting both tradition and modernity. Thus, "common people" in human geography represent the functional population—those who drive economic growth, maintain cultural diversity, and form the backbone of demographic, social, and spatial systems.

Geographical Distribution

Naga Saints: Concentrated in northern India, especially the Himalayan belt (Kedarnath, Gangotri, Amarnath), and major pilgrimage centers (Haridwar, Ujjain, Prayagraj, Nashik).

Aghoris: Primarily located in Varanasi (Manikarnika Ghat, Harishchandra Ghat), with smaller groups found in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Himalayan caves.

Geographical Setting

Naga Saints: Found in Himalayan caves, pilgrimage towns, and Kumbh Mela sites. Their settlements are temporary, fluid, and spiritual, not bound to permanent towns or villages.

Aghoris: Based mainly in cremation grounds and forests. Their geography is tied to deathscapes, a unique cultural landscape in human geography.

Common People: Reside in permanent settlements—villages, towns, and cities—organized around agriculture, trade, services, and industries.

Food Habits

Naga Saints: Simple vegetarian diet, sustained by alms (bhiksha) and natural resources such as fruits, roots, and milk.

Aghoris: Some follow unconventional or symbolic food habits to challenge purity norms, though many also survive on simple offerings from disciples.

Common People: Food choices shaped by agriculture, economy, and culture (e.g., rice in South India, wheat in North India, fish in Bengal).

Economic Life

Naga Saints: Non-productive economy; rely on donations, offerings, and temple networks. Some manage akhara lands and institutions.

Aghoris: Dependent on alms and ritual services such as healing, blessings, and tantric practices.

Common People: Active participants in formal and informal economies—farming, trade, industry, services—with wealth accumulation and property ownership.

Lifestyle

Naga Saints: Martial, disciplined, and communal life in akhara networks. Ash-smeared bodies, dreadlocks, tridents, and participation in Kumbh processions symbolize their identity.

Aghoris: Reclusive, meditative, and individualistic. Reside in cremation grounds and practice rituals symbolizing the unity of life and death.

Common People: Socially structured, family-oriented individuals whose lives are influenced by work, education, technology, and consumerism.

Human Geography Conditions:

1. Settlement Patterns

Ascetics: (Naga Saints & Aghoris): Ascetics typically opt for transient, hallowed locations for their settlements as opposed to long-term homes. Himalayan caves, pilgrimage routes, and makeshift camps during the Kumbh Mela are the dwelling places of Naga Saints. Their communities are ephemeral, dissolving after pilgrimages or rituals are

finished. Aghoris, on the other hand, identify with remote forest regions, riverbanks, and cremation sites (smashanas). Their settlements, which symbolize spiritual disengagement from worldly existence, are symbolic rather than practical.

Common People: The common people, on the other hand, build long-term communities like towns, cities, and villages. Social life, economic activity, and survival are the main focuses of the planning and structure of these settlements. Fertile plains are home to agricultural villages, but urban centers form close to rivers, trade routes, or industrial centers. These areas display the distinction between functional and spiritual habitation by emphasizing housing, infrastructure, and long-term stability.

2. Cultural Landscapes

Ascetics: Aghoris and Naga Saints construct sacred geographies that turn the surrounding environment into places of worship. Rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna, and Godavari develop into destinations for pilgrimages and ceremonial bathing in addition to being sources of water. Forest hermitages, Himalayan caves, and cremation grounds are repurposed as places of spiritual practice. Symbolism, ritual, and sacredness are prioritized over productivity in their landscapes.

Common People: Common people create useful landscapes that are influenced by their means of subsistence. Economic and social needs are reflected in factories, schools, transportation networks, marketplaces, and agricultural areas. Terraced farming in hills, irrigated fields, and contemporary urban infrastructure are all examples of how the landscape has been altered to maximize productivity. The prevailing geography is still social and economic rather than austere, even though their spaces are still marked by festivals and rituals.

3. Population & Social Structure

Ascetics: Members of ascetic groups are few and dispersed. They don't care about their family and kinship ties, opting instead to join spiritual orders like guru-disciple lineages (for Aghoris) or akharas (for Naga Saints). Although seniority is determined by initiation and spiritual discipline, their social structure is simple and frequently egalitarian within the group.

Common People: Common people live within large, hierarchical social systems. Families are the basic social unit, extended into kinship networks, caste, and class divisions. Their population density is high in fertile regions and urban centers. Social structure determines occupation, marriage, rituals, and status. Unlike ascetics, who reject familial obligations, common people rely heavily on social systems for survival, reproduction, and identity.

4. Interaction with Nature

Ascetics: The relationship between ascetics and nature is one of acceptance rather than domination. Naga Saints adapt to Himalayan cold, monsoon rains, and scorching plains without seeking comfort. Aghoris live in cremation grounds exposed to heat, smoke, and natural elements, seeing them as part of spiritual discipline. Their way of life involves minimal alteration of the environment—they consume what nature provides and leave behind little ecological footprint.

Common People: Common people transform nature to suit their needs. Agriculture involves clearing forests, irrigating fields, and domesticating animals. Urbanization requires altering landscapes through construction, deforestation, and industrialization. Modern technology (dams, air conditioning, transport networks) further insulates people from natural constraints. This demonstrates a functional, exploitative interaction with nature, contrasting sharply with the ascetics' adaptive approach.

Works

Naga Saints: Spiritual teaching, pilgrimage leadership, and maintaining religious order through akharas.

Aghoris: Spiritual transformation, healing, and meditation are examples of ritual practices.

Common People: A wide range of professions in technology, trade, education, healthcare, and agriculture.

Climatic Conditions

Naga Saints: Adapt to the severe Himalayan weather and the varying seasons of pilgrimage towns, Naga Saints.

Aghoris: Accept nature and live in harsh environments such as riverbanks, forests, and cremation ghats. without opposition.

Common People: To combat climate pressures, adapt agriculture and settlements to local climates; use technology (air conditioning, irrigation, and housing) more and more.

Contributions:**1. Naga Saints**

The main contributions of the Naga Saints are to sacred geography, religion, and culture: Preservation of Traditions: They protect traditional Hindu customs that have their roots in Shaivism, making sure that Philosophies, pilgrimages, and rituals are transmitted from one generation to the next. They play a crucial part in the Kumbh Mela, where their processions and spiritual guidance strengthen the group's religious identity.

Improving Pilgrim Culture: By situating themselves next to sacred rivers and pilgrimage routes, they transform landscapes into cultural hubs. Because pilgrims are drawn to their camps in quest of guidance and blessings, religious tourism is sustained.

Defenders of Spiritual Heritage: During times of conflict, the once-ferocious ascetics known as Naga Saints defended temples, holy places, and dharma. They still represent spiritual guardianship and cultural resilience in the Indian subcontinent.

Their contribution to human geography consists of the creation and preservation of sacred landscapes that are fundamental to India's cultural map.

2. Aghoris:

The Aghoris contribute in more philosophical and symbolic fields: Social Taboos Are Under Attack: By living on cremation grounds and engaging in activities considered impure, they subvert traditional notions of pollution, purity, and social exclusion. This challenges rigid caste norms and redraws the boundaries of cultural geography.

Philosophy of Detachment: By highlighting non-duality—the idea that life and death, purity and impurity, are one—they contribute to Indian spiritual thought. They stand for the notion that moksha, or ultimate liberation, is the outcome and that nature and the human body are transient.

Contribution to Mysticism: Aghoris captivate academics and spiritual seekers around the world. Despite being extreme, their practices enhance India's reputation as a mystic nation by drawing attention to its varied spiritual landscapes.

Aghoris create deathscapes, such as cremation grounds and riverbanks, as potent cultural landscapes that transform frightening locations into places of contemplation and metamorphosis.

3. Common People:

The most obvious and useful contributions to society, the economy, and cultural continuity are made by the average person:

Driving Economic Growth: They are the foundation of India's economy, relying on trade, industries, services, and agriculture. Through their labor, natural landscapes are transformed into towns, cities, markets, and farms.

Maintaining Cultural Diversity: India's rich cultural diversity is preserved and practiced by the general public through thousands of languages, cuisines, art forms, and regional customs. Their social customs, festivals, and daily activities preserve their intangible cultural heritage.

The foundation of social systems: The demographic structure of India is made up of caste networks, families, and communities that are run by regular people. They guarantee generational continuity, education, social order, and reproduction. According to human geography, the nation's everyday life and modernization process are supported by the functional landscapes that the general populace creates on an economic, demographic, and social level.

Findings

1. Food Habits: Ascetics follow minimal or symbolic diets; common people follow socially accepted, 1. Food Habits: Common people eat socially acceptable, agriculturally based diets, while ascetics follow minimal or symbolic diets.
2. Economy: Ordinary people engage in organized economic life, while saints abstain from wealth.
3. Lifestyle & Settlement: Ordinary people live in permanent homes, while saints lead holy, nomadic lives, settlements.
4. Cultural Practices: While common people adhere to family and community-based customs, saints place a strong emphasis on discipline and spiritual rites.
5. The Interaction between Humans and the Environment: While saints adjust to nature, ordinary people alter it for growth and survival.

Suggestions

1. Documentation & Preservation: Systematic recording of Naga and Aghori traditions.
2. Awareness & Education: Promote their cultural and philosophical contributions.
3. Balanced View: Avoid stereotyping ascetics as mystical or superstitious.
4. Comparative Research: Further study on adaptability of ascetics vs common people.
5. Policy & Support: Preservation programs that respect ascetics' autonomy.

Conclusion:

From the standpoint of human geography, Aghoris and Naga Saints symbolize a spiritual human - geography, where sacred landscapes, asceticism, and faith define space. Common people, in contrast, represent a functional-human geography, where settlements, food systems, and economies are tied to survival, growth, and modernization. Both lifestyles coexist in India, making its geography a unique blend of tradition, spirituality, and modernity.

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Conflicts of interest

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