

EVOLUTION OF KULLU AS A SACRED CENTRE: AN HISTORICAL NOTE

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1.1 ABSTRACT

Kullu Valley in the state of Himachal Pradesh in the Himalayas of India is a centre of importance known to be held in high esteem. This distinct religious topography has been created through a set of interacting conditions, one being the geographical seclusion, the strong polytheistic heritage, plus the Kullu Dussehra festival on an annual basis. This paper addresses how Kullu has transformed into a sacred centre, paying attention to the complex interplay of its deified natural environment, the worship of local deities (devtas and devis), and the socio-religious life of the region. The sacred geometry of the valley is characterised by the system of temples, pilgrimage sites and sacred groves, each of which is attributed to a definite deity and its mythological story. The local deities are deities thought to rule the terrain and the individuals associated with it, and they are central in day-to-day life, providing leadership over local traditions, law and societal way of doing things. Kullu Dussehra festival is a dramatic reminder of this divine identity, and in this festival, hundreds of deities are united in a large procession to honour the main deity, who is Raghunath. This incident not only confirms the inferior and interdependent character of the divine pantheon but also proves to be a critical site of reassertion of communal connections and cultural identity. This paper proceeds to demonstrate that Kullu is a sacral area and not an area of religious belief but rather a reality that finds its way throughout the social, cultural and political environment of the area, so much that it qualifies to be the epitome place of a living sacred centre in the Indian Himalayas, through a phenomenological outlook.

Keywords: Deovtas, Kullu, Goor, Tharah Karadu, Mohras, Rath, Dussehra, ashta-dhatu, Rishi.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

Indian civilisation gives special significance to sacred centres. Hyped in myths and legends and sanctified through religion, these centres not only welcome pilgrims and worshippers in huge numbers but also serve as an important seat of learning where sacred knowledge is perpetuated, interpreted and taught. To get a comprehensible view of civilisation in continuity and change, it is imperative to comprehend the cultural role of such centres.¹ Kullu is the valley of the Gods and nestles in the Pir Panjal range in the western Himalaya. Its north-east border lies against the boundary district of Lahaul and Spiti, and its other three borders, except for the mountainous range of Chota and Bara-Bhangal of Kangra, are adjacent to the surrounding territories of Mandi and Shimla.² Kullu is a district in the central part of Himachal Pradesh, and the district is centrally located in the state, with its capital at Kullu. The district has an area of 5,503 square kilometres as per the survey of India, which has not changed since the creation of the district in 1963. The tehsils in the district are four, i.e. Manali, Kullu, Banjar and Nirmand, and the sub-tehsils are two, like Ani and Sainj, with the same four places as their headquarters.³ Medieval India Rituals were used to amalgamate territorial and politically founded differences. This can be viewed, as it is, by the tendency of Hindu kings to choose one of the existing local cults and to use it to the entire land of their Kingdom through royal beneficence. The people who occupy the Himalayas with the prevalent mountain chains have a fabulous religious history, mythology, folklore and tradition. They fall in love with their primitiveness no less than with the heights of

civilisation. They are an exception to the old and the new. They refer to their old history in their myths and rituals.

The social and religious aspects of Kullu do not match those of the plains. The hill people are not only Shaivites or Vaishnavites. They are, in effect, one and the same. When they worship their gods, they are a representation of their religion. They venerate Shiva as they also venerate Vishnu and his epiphanies. They respect Vishnu as much as they do Shakti. The hill people also believe and worship a very high number of village and clan deities and kula deities, and in their polytheistic beliefs, they also have a very high number of rituals they perform in their daily life. They have many deities, and their deification is very diverse.⁴. Above all, there are Jamlus, Jognis, Nags, and so many more. The majority of them are remembered by the name of the place they are worshipped in or the place they appeared in. There is also a lovely ceremony of the Bir cult in the hills. Birs such as Narsingh, Bhairo, Keilu, Gugga, Batal, Khetarpal, etc. are some of the mightiest heroes who are appealed to for their blessings to overcome the impact of diseases and other afflictions of life. Nag cult is one of the ancient belief systems in the hills, and most of the rituals are involved in the cult. Nags are considered water ghosts. They not only bring about rain, but also regulate the floods.⁵.

Many village-based deities are found in the Kullu region located in the State of Himachal Pradesh North India. Mostly these local gods and goddesses are worshipped in temples that are located within or close to the villages. The villagers consider these deities so sacred and pray to them on matters that they want a solution on both the individual level and the community situation. They are also treated with utmost respect when removed from the temple in the form of their movable images. On such occasions, they are placed as god leaders with holier servants. The universe of gods in Kullu is unlimited. People have temples and shrines, and they worship them in towns, cities, villages, and localities. Kullai people have a favourite saying which goes like this: tharah karadu, tharah narayan. Narayan, of course, is the name of Vishnu, who is a deity in most villages. Tharah means eighteen in literal meaning, but scholars have some interpretations of it, such as multitude or an auspicious number and so on.

1. Shamshar Mahadev (near Anni)
2. Sukirni (Banjar)
3. Trijugi Narayan (Dayar)
4. Kasoli Narayan (Kasol)
5. Jagtham (Barshaini)
6. Bhaga Siddh (Pini Kais)
7. Sinhmāl (Gohar Kais)
8. Girmal (Banogi)
9. Manu Rishi (Manali)
10. Thirmal (Dhara Kais)
11. Ishvari Narayan (Ajimal Soel)
12. Jeeva Narayan (Jana Naggar)
13. Jamlu (Malana)
14. Ambal (Chachogi)
15. Shubh Narayan (Rumsu)
16. Harshu Narayan (Hallan)
17. Shandil (Shalin)
18. Gautam Rishi (Goshal).

Objectives

1. To examine the historical evolution of Kullu Valley as a sacred and religious centre in the Indian Himalayas.
2. To analyze the role of local deities, temple networks, and the Kullu Dussehra festival in shaping the socio-religious identity of the region.
3. To investigate the socio-economic impact of sacred traditions and temple institutions on the cultural and material life of the Kullu people.

HABITAT AND CLASSIFICATION OF DEITIES IN KULLU

Kullu has its own deities, living at nature spots like the rivers, springs, streams, lakes, valleys, rocks, trees, fields, mountains and forests. These gods, according to Mr. Lyall, a former settlement officer of Kangra, are classified, into classes such as devs (male gods), devis (goddesses), rishi-munis (sages), jognees (female spirits) and nags (serpent deities)⁶. These deities have their social organisation and jurisdiction. Each village has its own *devta*, which is personified and is a part of the daily lifestyle of the Kullu villages.⁷. Deities of Kullu valley are the wealthiest members of the villages. The residents contribute and donate a lot of wealth in the name of the clan god. The role of Gods is also very significant as they are the courts, hospitals and enjoyment organs of the people. A priest normally takes care of God. The priest is family-inherited, where the family of priests serves God from generation to generation. They also possess the lands of God and are able to work them. The other one is the Goor, or the voice of God in trance.⁸. It could be any village person, and it most often goes into a trance, at special events, to become the voice of a God. God can resolve disputes of divorce, adultery, fights, family issues, illnesses, etc, through him. The Kullu valley Gods are extremely human and social. They have both friends and enemies. They enjoy moving around village to village, and the pilgrimage goes as well. They are stored in beautiful sacred places and are normally the tallest buildings in the village.

RITUAL PRACTICES, SYMBOLISM, AND THE HUMANISATION OF DEITIES IN KULLU

Many of the rites and rituals are carried out in Kullu, thus having some purpose or an end in mind. An end can be physical, such as good health, beauty, long life, etc, social, such as fame, wealth, power, status, etc, and natural, such as rainfall, floods, droughts, people's farming producing plenty, etc. All these are fulfilled through a combination of ritual performances. The language of rituals is never a non-code that can or cannot be translated into human language. It is guarded with such jealousy as it is very secret to the knowledge of any wide-range populace, and the practice is quite technical that any misfulfillment of behaviour, no matter how slight, can cripple the effectiveness of the rite. The spells are passed on from generation to generation and by mouth-to-mouth of generally illiterate students. The gods of Kullu have slowly been acquiring more and more human-like characteristics over the course of many generations. Nowadays, they are regarded as nearly human beings- they eat, drink, walk, live as well as dance together with the people who are their devotees. It is considered that these gods directly convey a message to the people. A number of mohras (sacred masks); usually of eight-metal alloys (ashta-dhatu), of gold, silver or brass; represent each of the village gods, and in addition, there are many mohras common to more than one god.⁹. Of the masks worn in the service, one there is which is always regarded as the principal and original, the one which is supposed to be itself the devta (deity) himself. Such holy masks, also called mohras are put in a wooden chariot or palki which are elaborately decorated with colored silk threads, ornaments and flowers. The tradition is most prominently witnessed at the Kullu Dussehra.

MYTHICAL ORIGINS AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE KULLU DUSSEHRA TRADITION

The famous Kullu Dussehra is a week long festival, which dates back to the year 1637 during the rule of Raja Jagat Singh. As per mythology, the king had been given a curse because of making one of the Brahmin commit suicide. His gruesome visions haunted him--knowing there was blood and worms in every bite he took he found himself in need of spiritual consultation. A saintly man encouraged him to take the statue of Lord Rama in a temple in the plain areas and dedicate his kingdom to the statue. The king acted on this advice and had the Baba to steal the idol and bring it to Kullu. When the idol was taken to the palace Raja Jagat Singh gave up his throne in favour of lord Raghunath and claimed himself as humble servant of god.

One day, the king wanted to pay tribute to Lord Raghunath and he requested the participation of all the local deities of the whole Kullu Valley in a special ceremony that was going to be performed as part of the celebrations of the Dussehra festival. This performance sired a permanent culture; year by year, hundreds of deities of the villages join the festival at Kullu. The tradition is still upheld even since the end of princely rule, seeing more than 250 deities being invited in a year. The local deities are usually organized into three groups and these are the ancient sages, respected women in epics, serpent gods (Nagas), and mythical tribal chiefs or heroes. There are tales of how these deities came into being. An example of this can be told of a woman in Bagi village who hit a golden mohra (mask) with her rake when she was cleaning out pine needles. A copse of trees was later recognized as his representation and the village, in the process, started the worship of the deity and later on erected his temple.

Thus, Lord Raghunath became the principal deity of Kullu; the other deities are Hidimba Devi of Dhungri, Vasista Rsi of Vashisht Village, Bijli Mahadev and Devta Narsingh of Sultanpur, Basheshwar Mahadev of Bajaura, Fungani Mata of Lug Valley, Dakshineshwar Mahadev, Devi Ambika and Parshuram of Nirmand, and Jamlu of Malana.¹⁰ Parshuram temple in Nirmandh, hot springs of Manikarn, Goddess Tripura Sundari of Naggar, Srikhand Mahadev and Shringi Rishi temple in Banjar, etc¹¹. The temples of minor Gods are several. To name a few, Bhakhali mata, village deity of Sirhan, deity of Budhi Nagini, village deity of Bali Chauki, Thirmal temple in Kais, Girmal temple at Banogi village and Bhaga Sidh temple at Kais, etc. Thus, one can see that people of Kullu have faith in a large number of major and minor gods whom they worship through various symbols and rituals. It is a fact that temples possess a great deal of multifarious activities that form a very important part of the economic development of people. The rise of gigantic Hindu temples and religious institutions is accompanied by the growing popularity of giving out land and other items, without which their existence would be impossible. The channels of liberal endowments of land made by their rulers, their chiefs and feudatories in the early medieval period meant that the temples were regarded as the landed magnates. Kullu Dussehra is one of the most significant festivals in the Kullu region of Himachal Pradesh, India which welcomes over 200 deities of the region each year in a huge procession (that is held on the main grounds of the Kullu town, by the Beas River). The same sources can estimate that the total gold that these deities have to their strength is about 300 kilograms, and other antiques and valuable objects also. Within their own villages, the gods have complex temples, which are multistoried, are timber-framed and are in pagoda style. The ownership of these temples, as well as huge portions of land, is in the name of the gods. The gods also are decorated with gold, silver, traditional objects, antiques and musical instruments. Villagers have the custom of participating in donations of tiny amounts of gold to mark festive occasions or religious occasions.

ECONOMIC WEALTH OF DEITIES AND THE COMMERCIAL EVOLUTION OF KULLU DUSSEHRA

Most of the gods of Kullu are thought to be centuries old. It has been reported that approximately 50 of these deities are adorned with between 2 to 9 kilograms of gold, and other treasures. Devta Khurijal is reputed to have 8 kilograms of gold, Anant Balu Nag 6 kilograms and Devta Markanday Rishi of Mangalor village 5 kilograms. In the same manner, Lomesh Rishi is said to possess 45 kilograms of silver and on the other hand Narayan Devta is said to possess 40 kilograms of silver. According to a government survey by 2005 evaluating gifts, which include jewellery as well as cash, at least 13 temples were supposed to be receiving more than 10 lakh rupees annually as offerings.¹² The gods were placed in the temples where several rental assignments of land were on them, and they were paid back with grains. People of the villages of gods used the produce. The market usually arises where there is a concentration of people. This way, the fair was a supplement to the annual Dussehra fair. The festival dominated the annual market due to the week-long celebrations, and this greatly helped the economy of the region since Kullu was located on the trade route between Yarkand, Ladakh, Tibet and Lahaul and Spiti on one hand and the plains of Punjab on the other.

The Kullu Dussehra festival in its pure entity was a festival where regional arts and crafts were exchanged hence promoting and encouraging the local artisans. At first, the celebrations were limited to the borders of Kullu kingdom. In this time people would travel to the event with their deities, selling or exchanging agricultural produce and handcrafted goods that people brought with them.¹³ Handmade in the hinterlands of Himachal Pradesh was introduced for purchase so that people realised the tradition of the region and tried to support it and maintain the tradition in ways to promote the region. This festival has now become a mega event and serves to contribute to upholding and advancing local arts, crafts and traditions. With the development of the festival, there was also an increase in commerce, and distant people started to sell off their wares during the feast, and there were also the inroads of machine-made ones. These branded mass-produced products, such as those in Ludhiana, Saharanpur, etc, would ultimately replace the traditionally produced clothes, pottery, etc. Trading on Dussehra has taken a different form. The international nature of the festival, as well as international tourists who have also begun coming in large numbers after the festival, has also helped the rise in commerce, as well as given the economy of the region a boost.

Conclusion

Myths and rituals are very important in the social, cultural and religious life of the hill people. On a large scale, myths and some of the prevailing thoughts directed the activities of the mass of people in the hills. The method and handling through which these myths are transformed into practice are through symbols, faith, rituals and performativity. It is usually considered the opposite of cultural materialism. The symbols, rituals and performativity behaviour can be seen as a conceptual tool in the life of a family, a tribe or a community. Many of the rites are also undertaken in order to attain some objective or goal. An end can be physical, such as good health, beauty, longevity, etc, social, such as fame, wealth, power, status and so on and natural such as rain fall, floods, droughts, plenty of crops etc and these ends are attained through a combination of actions that are meritorious and ceremony which is performed. There are good-loving and honest people who respect all religions, and male and female gods live in the western Himalaya. Their ancient ways of doing things have never posed as an impediment in their quest for development in this world of science. Their Ishta - Deovtas and kula-deovtas never struggle over religion. They were always fighting to bring peace, as well as harmony and a sense of faith in one another, among the citizens. The entity of the Kullu

deity plays a huge part in the material aspects of the lives of the people of Kullu. It will also be useful in grasping how the people and the society engaged themselves in the spiritual construction of the deities in Kullu in the process of their beliefs and myths to define themselves as the stakeholders of history.

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- ⁹ A Mohra represents not only the face but the entire body of the devta.
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