

Haḍimbā Becoming Herself: A Himalayan Goddess in Change

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ABSTRACT

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The dissertation examines the cult of the goddess Haḍimbā that is located in the Kullu Valley of the West Indian Himalaya (Himachal Pradesh). Massive transformations introduced in the region in recent years by means of better transportation systems, a developing capitalist economy, new technologies, and, most prominently, tourism have drastically affected life in the region and have destabilized traditional social and cultural patterns. These changes are engaged by the residents of the Kullu Valley in various ways that are informed and oriented by their traditional worldview and ritual system. The main chapters of the dissertation present and analyze three separate yet interrelated spaces that constitute a veritable theater of change. In these spaces, in which Haḍimbā figures prominently, the identity of the goddess, the rituals performed in her honor, and the powers she is believed to possess are constantly negotiated and refashioned: practitioners foreground Haḍimbā's identity as a Mahābhārata demoness instead of equating her solely with the Purāṇic Durgā (ch. 1); they justify, protect, and increasingly offer her bloody buffalo sacrifices despite criticisms leveled against this practice by outsiders (ch. 2); and they uphold their views concerning the ability of their goddess to control local weather patterns, even as the climate is changing and competing paradigms offer new theories in this regard (ch. 3). It is in this sense—in light of these massive renegotiations of Haḍimbā's character—that she is “becoming herself.”

Concurrently, it is not only the goddess' but her devotees' identity that is being negotiated and refashioned. Taken as a whole, the choices made by local people in these three spaces reveal their attempt to recast their marginality, the magnitude of which they have only recently begun to realize. They do so by pursuing new frameworks of reference that aim to challenge, if not subvert, the hegemonic narratives that are promoted in the region by outside forces. Thus, by highlighting Haḍimbā's Mahābhārata associations they offer a new kind of epic frame for national and religious identity; by insisting on the performance of animal sacrifice they invert and celebrate what is elsewhere considered a backward and illegitimate act; and by retaining their belief in the control of their goddess over her territory they defend their own agency and find a legitimate place for themselves and their way of life at the pan-Indian and global table. At the same time, the dissertation shows that local religious beliefs and practices do not remain untouched by these external pan-Indian and global paradigms and that in the interaction between them a new a hybrid worldview is being formed.

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Preface: Note on Trasliteration and Translation

Hindi and Pahari terms are rendered with diacritics and are italicized throughout the text. Names of Sanskrit texts, gods and goddess are also rendered with diacritics but, being more commonly recognized in English, are not italicized. I have dispensed with diacritics and italicization in names of persons, castes, and places. In quotations from secondary English sources I have kept the rendering of the terms as they appear in the original.

God and Goddess are capitalized when the reference is to the Supreme Being (Bhagvān) or to the Great Goddess. I use lower case when the referent is plural or generic. Mātā (Mother) is capitalized when appears as part of a goddess' name (e.g., Haḍimbā Mātā) but rendered in lower case in all other cases.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Hindi and Pahari (the dialect spoken in the Kullu Valley) are my own. Underlined words indicate that the speaker used the original English term. Interestingly, several such English terms have become more common than others in everyday speech in the village, though the underlying logic is not always clear. In the case of the word “greed,” for example, which has become very common in local use for describing a conspicuous contemporary human trait, the explanation could be either that a global word was chosen to describe a global phenomenon or simply that it has become popular in the context of conversing with foreign tourists. This could also explain the popularity in local speech of words such as “time,” “system,” and “good morning.” The latter has become a common greeting appropriate to every hour of the day. In any case I underline these terms for the sake of correct transcription.

When I quote conversations that were held in English I sometimes rework the grammar a little bit since the colloquial English spoken in the region often follows the logic of Hindi grammar and may otherwise be hard to understand.

The names of people mentioned in this work are real. I have obscured specific identities or used pseudonyms (noted in brackets after the person's name) only in the few cases in which I thought the individuals discussed might feel uncomfortable if the information about them became public. This, I should stress, was not requested by the individuals themselves and is done by me as a measure of extra precaution. It is noteworthy that throughout my research I have always been open about what I do and it was well-known in the village that I was conducting research on the goddess Haḍimbā and on religion and life in the area. Most of my informants were very happy to cooperate and many of them repeatedly expressed their eagerness to see my book about them coming out. Often there was the clear implication that they would like to see themselves, so named, in its pages.

INTRODUCTION: The Settings—Kullu Valley, Himachal Pradesh.

A Bus Ride from Delhi

The journey to Kullu Valley begins in the “World of the Moon.” Across from the “World of the Moon,” to be exact. That is to say, in a gas station on Delhi's Janpath Road across from a grey and somewhat depressing structure known as the “Chandraloka Building” (Skt. World of Moon). It is from here that the night buses pick up their passengers for the ride up north at around 5 PM every day. Most of the travelers are domestic tourists, on their way to a several-day vacation in the famous hill town of Manali, where, if the road is clear, the bus will arrive at around 9AM the following morning.

The ‘honeymoon couples’—newlywed on their way to a romantic vacation in the hills—are the most frequents riders on this route. The girl, often in her mid-twenties, is well-dressed. Her palms are decorated with the ceremonial henna patterns and her arms are covered with the shiny red wedding bangles. The boy, usually a bit older, is expected to take charge. A little nervous at first, yet struggling to appear in control, he inspects the pre-paid receipt provided by the travel agent, consults with someone over the phone, and asks around for orienting clues. Once the right bus is located and the luggage lies safely in the rear trunk, the young man would often snaps a few photos of his new bride against the background of the smoggy rush-hour Janpat road. Middle-class families are also quite common here - a mother and a father and two kids, with several carry-on bags heavy with snacks, water bottles, blankets and a few extra clothes for the night. They relax only after swapping seats with neighboring passengers and making sure they all sit together, within reach of their bags. They are usually quite noisy at this initial stage. The third most observable group is that of the foreign backpackers, many of them young Israelis who

have just finished their mandatory army service. They stand out with their colorful, somewhat baggy clothes, long hair, and rough English. Most of them are over-cautious about their luggage and unhappy with their seats. Travel agents in the city, who make their living off such backpackers, are in constant competition with each other and hence tend to promise things they cannot always provide. The bus personnel, familiar with the situation, remain calm and unimpressed. They tend to “forget” their English at crucial moments, when the volume of complaints increases. Things always work out in the end. After a few Tibetans and occasional red-robed Buddhist monks take their seats, the bus is ready to leave. A young boy moves up the aisle handing out water bottles, blankets, and plastic bags—“for the curves,” he explains. Chair-seats are pulled back, legs are stretched forward, and the sixteen-hour bus ride to the West Himalayas begins.

The first three hours are spent in Delhi, in traffic and in picking up additional passengers who wait along the route. At 7:30 pm a Bollywood film is played on a flat-screen TV at the front of the bus. The Indian passengers are completely absorbed, the foreigners complain about the noise. At 10:30 pm the bus stops for a thirty-minute dinner break in one of the “buffet-style” roadside restaurants that have sprung along this route in recent years. Nobody complains when the film that was paused right before the break is not resumed afterward. The aisle lights are dimmed and everyone fall sleep. Except, one at least hopes, for the driver and his assistants, who sit at the front and keep chatting and listening to old Hindi music throughout the night. A few hours later, the bus leaves the state of Haryana and enters the Punjab. Having passed Chandigarh—the famous capital of the state, which was designed in the 1950s by the renowned French architect Le Corbusier—it turns slightly to the east and reaches Swarghat, where it stops again for fueling, paying taxes, and a quick ‘open-toilet’-break for the male passengers. It is here,

where the road reaches the Shivalik hills—the southernmost east-west mountain chain of the Himalayas—that the long hilly climb to Manali begins.



Figure 1: Map of Indian States. Census of India 2011.¹

Entering the state of Himachal Pradesh, one begins to appreciate the advantages of Swedish automotive technology—the advanced suspension of the Volvo bus reduces the nauseating effect of the curves to a minimum. Still, for those who spend their lives in the plains, the curves pose a real visceral challenge and the pre-circulated plastic bags become quite handy. It is not always a pretty sight. Just before dawn, another break takes place, near Sundar Nagar—“the beautiful city.” In a small gloomy neon-lit roadside

¹ http://www.censusindia.gov.in/maps/State_Maps/maps.htm, accessed on August 1, 2012. Himachal Pradesh in the north, just below the state of Jammu & Kashmir.

restaurant one can enjoy an over-priced cup of hot chai and get the first glimpse of the still dim mountainous surrounding. A few hours later, after passing through the ancient kingdom of Mandi, the bus arrives in a small town named Bhuntar and finally stands at the gates of the Kullu Valley of the West Indian Himalayas.

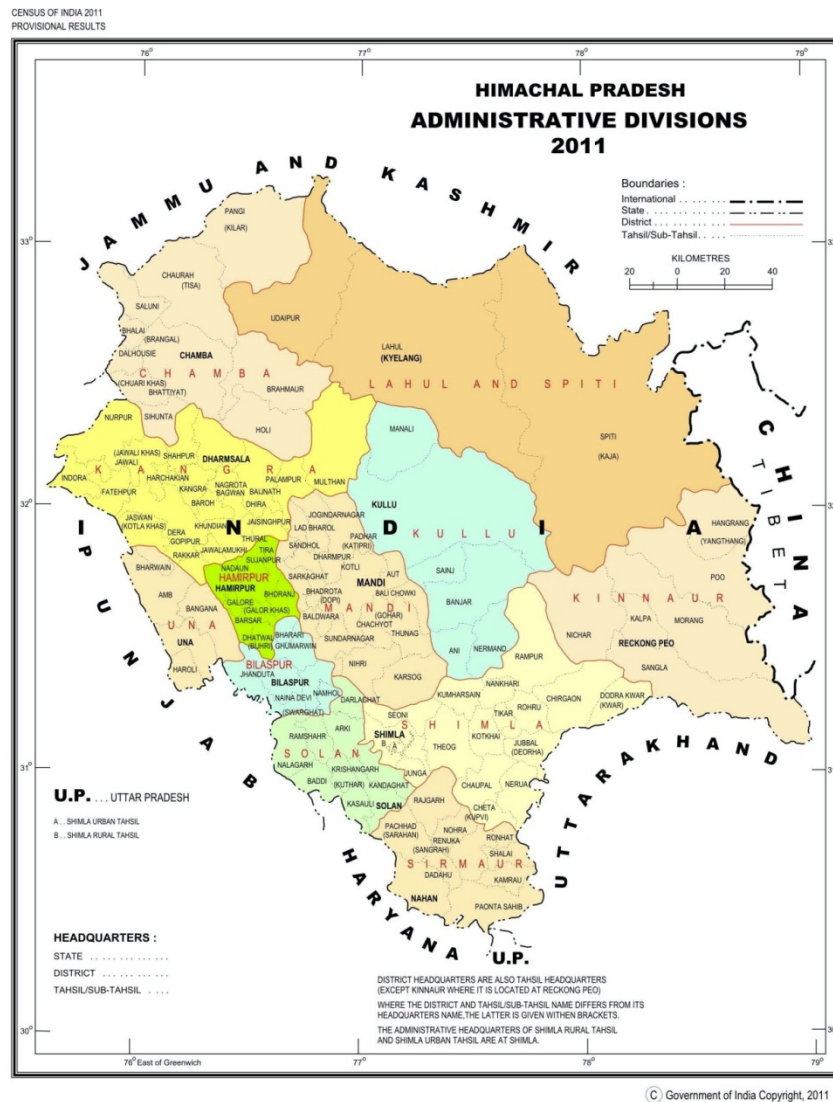


Figure 2: Map of Himachal Pradesh, Administrative Divisions 2011. Census of India 2011.²

² http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/himachal/ADM_%20DIVISION_2011%20Page%20-8.pdf, accessed on August 1, 2012. Kullu District is in the center of the state, with the Kullu Valley located in its North Western part.

Bhuntar lies on the banks of the Beas River, which drains the Kullu Valley from the north. Originating near the Rohtang Pass at the upper tip of the valley, the Beas runs 60 km to the south where it passes Bhuntar and continues on its 400 km journey southwest, at the end of which it merges into the Sutlej River about 40 km south of Amritsar. In Bhuntar, the Beas is joined from the east by one of its largest tributaries – the Parvati Nala (Parvati Stream). Many of the foreigners and most of the Israelis usually get off here. They hire taxis that travel up the Parvati Valley to Kasol – a tiny township surrounded by villages that has become a popular hub for foreign backpackers in recent years. Newly-built guesthouses offer basic lodging and simple food alongside breathtaking views, a quite mountain atmosphere, and occasional trance parties in the surrounding woods. They also offer what many of the travelers are here for: a taste of *charas* - the legendary high-end Himalayan hashish, which is the area's most lucrative cash crop.

The Parvati Valley offers other attractions as well. Backpackers trek to Khir Ganga, a hot spring located a few kilometers into the mountains, which is a favorite hangout for Himalayan sadhus (wandering ascetics) and foreign tourists alike. They tour the crumbling and steamy village of Manikaran (*Maṇikaraṇ*—jewel-eared), where, according to the legend, Pārvatī, the consort of Lord Śiva, lost one of her earrings while sporting in the river. The jewel, as it turned out, fell in the lap of Śeṣnāg, the underworld serpent-master of jewels and gems. Śiva, however, made him give the earring back, which he did by blowing a hot stream of water that went up and carried Pārvatī's ornament to the surface. The boiling water, rising from the belly of the earth, formed here one of the

several hot springs that can be found in the region.³ Himalayan sadhus like to come here and cook their rice, packed in little cloth bags, in the boiling sulphur water. Manikaran Sahib, a *gurudvārā* located at the end of the village, is a popular pilgrimage destination for visiting Sikh devotees who like to tour the region while riding motorcycles in large groups.

A rather unique place is located on the ridge between the Parvati and the Kullu valleys. The “strange” village of Malana, as it is perceived by both outsiders and local people,⁴ was, until quite recently, one of the most secluded villages in the region. Its 1100 residents are famous for their distinct language (Kanashi), which is different from the Pahari (mountain) dialect spoken in the rest of the region. The village is also known for its idiosyncratic system of governance, the endogamous practice of its inhabitants and their avoidance of physical contact with all the other social groups in the region.⁵ The Malana villagers are also the cultivators of the world’s most celebrated cannabis, known as the “Malana Cream.” This high-quality *charas* debuted on the world stage in the 1980s and has since been ranked first on Amsterdam’s best-hashish charts. Malana’s fierce and powerful god Jamlu, whom many identify with the Vedic seer Jāmadagni, vehemently guards the village from the outside world. Communicated through his possessed medium, he prohibits the construction of a motorable road to the village, thereby making it difficult for the state authorities to check this illegal activity.

³ This story is well known in the region. Visitors can learn about it from books sold in the village or temple brochures.

⁴ I will henceforth refer to local people simply as “locals.”

⁵ Rosser (1960). The highly endogamous nature of the Malana village has been confirmed by genetic studies as well; see Giroti and Talwar (2010). The village is probably one of the several Ladhaki posts established for protecting ancient trade routes in the area (Giroti and Talwar 2010: 125).

Still in Bhuntar, waiting for the passengers heading for Parvati Valley to get off, one may get a glimpse of a distant temple located on the tip of the mountain overlooking the confluence of the Beas and Parvati. This famous temple, overlooking the gates of the Kullu Valley, is dedicated to Bijlī Mahādev—Śiva of lightning—one the most powerful and highly respected deities in the region. Locals say that every once in a while a lightning strikes the temple and smashes the *piṇḍī* inside (*piṇḍī* is an aniconic form of a divine being, a *śivaliṅga*-like rock in the case of Bijlī Mahādev). The broken pieces are said to then be glued back together with butter in a secret ritual performed behind closed doors.



Figure 3: Kullu Valley: A view to the south from above Old Manali village. Photo by Udi Halperin.

Leaving Bhuntar, the bus continues its journey up the valley. About half an hour later and only 10 km away—the average driving speed in this mountainous area is no more than 30-35 kilometers per hour—the bus stops again in the town of Kullu, the

administrative headquarters of the Kullu District. With a population of 18,306⁶ the town is the biggest in the valley, comprising residential areas, a central marketplace, and a fairly large vacant ground called Dhalpur, where the famous annual Daśahrā festival takes place. Previously known as Sultanpur, Kullu is still referred to by present-day villagers simply as “the city” (*shahar*). It has been the capital of the Valley since 1660, when King Jagat Singh had moved it here from its previous location in Nagar.⁷ The Rupi Palace—the traditional seat of the local royal family—is located in the upper part of town. Like many other kingly dynasties across India, the Rajas of Kullu lost their official title and privileges after India gained independence but retained a unique socio-political and religious status in the valley, as well as residence-rights in the palace.⁸ Maheshwar Singh, the oldest living male member of the family, is still referred to here as the “Kullu Raja”. He is a BJP politician who served as a member of the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly and the Lok Sabha in Delhi and is particularly known for the ritual role he plays during the Daśahrā. Dressed in traditional royal attire, he is carried in a palanquin on people’s shoulders, circumambulating the Dhalpur ground where hundreds of local deities camp. The festival is celebrated every October in the honor of Raghunāth Jī, the presiding deity of the valley, who was brought here from Oudh in the 17th century.

⁶ Census of India 2001, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs (http://www.censusindia.gov.in/PopulationFinder/View_Village_Population.aspx?pcaid=undefined&category=undefined), accessed on 15 March, 2012).

⁷ The capital of the Kullu kingdom shifted several times throughout history. According to the Kullu *Vaṃśāvalī*, it was first located in the village of Jagatsukh, about 35 km north of Kullu town, before it was moved a few km southward to Nagar by an early king named Visudh Pal. It was again relocated in 1660 by King Jagat Singh as mentioned above (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 429).

⁸ The Kullu kings officially ceased to be rajas already in 1852, when the British refused them this title and confirmed only the less honorific one of Rai. The area given to them by colonial authorities as jagir was repossessed by the state in 1950 (Berti 2006: 40).

The festival is a highly popular event, visited by scores of villagers, tourists, and media crews from all over the country.

As the bus keeps climbing up north alongside the Beas River on the 40 km road that leads to Manali, one can begin to appreciate the pristine beauty of the valley: Snow-clad peaks high above; mountain slopes covered with lush-green deodar forests in the middle and dotted with villages and glades; agricultural fields that become larger as they get closer to the riverbed; and a gushing stream below, just a few feet away from the bus. The more one advances towards Manali, the more apple orchards one is likely to see. In the past few decades, much of the traditional subsistence farming—based on small-scale horticulture and animal husbandry—has given way to cash-crop agriculture based primarily on lucrative apple cultivation. The Kullu valley has elderly residents who still remember a time when there were no tomatoes to be found, onions were sold by traveling merchants only once or twice a year, and salt was brought from Mandi, located three walking days away. But nowadays people receive most of their supply regularly from the Punjab. Today, one can get here tahini from Saudi Arabia, French grind coffee, and even lettuce, the most recent in a line of new products that have been introduced in the region in recent years.

In other times of the year, this scenery looks strikingly different. Tourists who visit the valley outside the high-season months of May and June may encounter dark grey sky, close-to-zero visibility, heavy rains, landslides, and even floods. During the wintertime, the mountains—and sometimes the road as well—turn white as they are covered with a beautiful snow blanket. A cold and somewhat adventurous vacation in Manali in that time of year is also quite popular. Lowlanders come to see and touch the

snow, slip on their bottoms as they walk to their hotels on the icy ground, and learn to ski for 500 rupees a lesson on the slopes of the nearby Solang Nala.

When the weather is good and the bus' windows are clear, however, one can glimpse quite a bit of early morning mountain life. Driving through tiny towns and villages, one sees little children walking down the hills on their way to school wearing all sorts of colorful uniforms. Women, clad with *potus*—a warm woolen blanket that is traditional dress of local women—carry heavy straw baskets on their backs as they head to the fields or to the surrounding forests to gather grass for the cows or wood for winter. Men, wearing heavy suit-like collared jackets known as Kullu coats and traditional caps on their heads, sit in small tea shops across the road, drinking chai and smoking their morning *bīḍīs*—cheap cigarettes filled with tobacco flake that is wrapped with a leaf tied with a string at one end. They, like the passengers in the bus, often stare at an occasional shepherd, who leads a flock of hundreds of sheep on the bumpy, at times muddy road that is marked 'National Highway 21' on official maps.

A few miles before reaching the Himalayan town of Manali, the marks of tourism grow increasingly visible. Shops appear along the route, with big signs advertising the 'best-quality' famous Kullu shawls that are sold inside, as well as Kullu caps and jackets, woolen blankets and socks, Kashmiri carpets, and other sorts of handicrafts. Fancy tourist-resorts and several-story hotels can be seen on both sides of the road and signboards reveal that additional ones are located further up, or sideways, along the lanes that branch off of the main route. The bus moves slowly, and stops every few hundred meters. Names of hotels are announced and passengers, who had booked their rooms in advance, get off at every stop. At last, the long ride ends at a non-paved muddy parking lot, where the passengers are surrounded by dozens of 'hotel guides' as soon as they

disembark. Cards are handed over, help with luggage is offered, and promises are made about beautiful rooms with great views, running hot water, and affordable prices. Tired and a bit overwhelmed, the tourists go their separate ways. The ride to Manali is over.

After refreshing in their rooms, and eating a quick breakfast, many of these newcomers will already be on their way to visit the goddess Haḍimbā, in her famous forest temple in Dhungri village. Spending some time in the temple and having paid their respects to the goddess, they will proceed to the Club House—a center for indoor and outdoor sports activities—where they will rest a little, play some pool, and grab a few snacks. Most of them will then climb up to the village of Old Manali, located just above the club, to visit the temple of Manu Ṛṣi—(Man Sage), ancestor of all humanity. Walking, or driving up the village’s only road, they take a peek at the scores of foreign backpackers, who hang out in dozens of restaurants, cafes, internet places, and shops that are spread along the way. They watch the latter, dressed in loose colorful cloths, drink mint tea, eat Israeli salads and humus dishes and smoke fragrant *charas* chillums—clay pipes traditionally used by wandering ascetics (*sadhus*). At night, the tourists will return to the town of Manali for shopping, dining, and hanging out with each other in the market’s central mall road.

On the next and following days, the tourists go on exploring the valley. They visit the temple of Vashisht Ṛṣi (The Sage Vasiṣṭh), in a village bearing a same name located on the other bank of the Beas. They drive to the old wooden castle in Nagar and visit the nearby art gallery of Nicholas Roerich, to enjoy the paintings of this famous Russian artist who settled in the Kullu Valley in 1928.⁹ Most of the tourists would not skip the trip

⁹ Another Roerich museum, which exhibits many of the artist’s beautiful paintings of the Himalaya, can be found in 319 West 107th Street, New York.

to the celebrated Rohtag Pass, the uppermost point in the valley, from which one proceeds to the neighboring valleys of Lahul and Spiti, or, a few hundred kilometers further, to the high-altitude plateau of Ladakh, in the Jammu-Kashmir state. On this high, often cold, and windy pass, a small shrine can be found, which is dedicated to Vyās Ṛṣi, the ancient seer who is considered the compiler of the four holy Vedas and the author of the Mahābhārata epic. It is after him that the Beas River, which originates not far from here, is believed to be named (Vyās > Beas). But hardly anyone goes to visit this small dome-like shrine. The tourists are too busy sliding on the snow and grabbing a quick lunch of rice and dal in one of the heated makeshift restaurants scattered across the pass. Snow is a big attraction for most Indians, who never experience it back home. For many, this would be the first time ever to see or touch it and it is thus no wonder that many of them report this as the highlight of their visit to this Valley of Gods, famous all over India.

Himachal Pradesh: History and Religion

The Kullu Valley of the West Indian Himalaya is located in the Kullu district of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh (H.P.). The district, whose total area measures 5503 square kilometers, is bound by Lahul and Spiti district on the north and northeast, Kinnaur on the east and southeast, Simla on the south, Mandi on the southwest and west, and Kangra district on the northwest. 92 percent of the total population—381,571, as per the 2001 census report—live in rural areas, with the rest residing in small towns.¹⁰ In recent decades, the Kullu Valley has become one of the most popular tourist destinations

¹⁰ Census of India 2001, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs (http://www.censusindia.gov.in/PopulationFinder/District_Master.aspx?state_code=02), accessed on 31 July 2012).

in the country, with nearly a million visitors in 1998.¹¹ Especially famous is the town of Manali, which is now a hub for both domestic and international tourism, with hundreds of hotels, restaurants, shopping areas and all sorts of tourist attractions. The valley is dotted with hundreds of villages, spread alongside the riverbed and on the mountains slopes.

Unfortunately, we know very little about the distant past of the Kullu region. Texts are almost non-existent, inscriptions are few, and temple architecture and art provide but general clues.¹² The main authority on the history of the region is a two-volume book published in 1933 by J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel, titled *History of the Panjab Hill States*. Combining references and materials from different sources across several regions, the two authors tell the history of the Western Himalaya, dedicating sixty pages to the Kullu district (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 413-73). In their account, they draw heavily on a manuscript prepared by Captain Harcourt, who himself relied on a local *Vamśāvalī*, the royal genealogy of the Kullu Kings:

The late Colonel (then Captain) Harcourt was the first to draw attention to the *Vansavali*, in his book, 'Kooloo, Lahoul and Spiti,' published in 1871. Colonel Harcourt was for three years Assistant Commissioner of Kulu, and thus possessed special advantages for inquiry and research, of which he fully availed himself. It was his intention, as he states, to have written a history of Kulu, for which he had collected a large amount of material. This, however, he was unable to do, and some time before his death he placed the whole of his manuscripts at our disposal. As an historical document the *Vansavali* seems to be open to suspicion, and some have regarded it as wholly unreliable previous to the accession of the Singh or Badani dynasty, about A.D. 1500... There is undoubtedly much confusion in the document, which weakens its reliability, more especially in the older portion dealing with the Pal dynasty, and for which we unfortunately possess little corroborative evidence of any kind. So far as the Singh or Badani dynasty is concerned, however, the *Vansavali* is corroborated

¹¹ 812,895 to be exact, according to the Director of Tourism, Shimla (2000), as quoted in Kuniyal (2004: 25). The numbers must have risen considerably since then.

¹² Hutchison and Vogel note that "Kulu seems never to have known an age of literary activity" (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 413).

by copper-plate deeds and inscriptions, as well as references in the Tibetan records, Mughal histories and the *Vansavalis* of neighboring Hill States (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 414-5).

It is important to note that Hutchison and Vogel did not possess their own copy of the *Vaṃśāvalī*, since most of the existing copies were destroyed in a fire in the early 19th century. Harcourt's copy is no longer available; neither is another one that was obtained by Sardar Hardyal Singh, on which he based his 1886 Urdu publication *Majmua Tawarikh Riyast e Kohistan, Panjab, Part III, Kullu* (Collected Histories of the Punjab Hill States, Part III, Kullu). This Urdu text is also extremely rare and, unfortunately, I have not yet been able to locate it. Tobdan provides an English translation of this text in his *Kullu - A Study in History* (Tobdan 2000), and observes that it seems that Harcourt and Singh must have used "two different versions of the *Vansavali*, since there is a good deal of difference in details at several places in the descriptions of the two authors" (Tobdan 2000: 5). What all this means is that our contemporary understanding of the earlier periods of the Kullu Valley relies on a 1933 publication, which is based on a manuscript made sixty years earlier by a colonial officer, which was itself based on a copy of a text that was lost in a fire, whose historical accuracy is quite debatable to begin with. One should be extremely careful, then, when speculating on those distant times.

It should also be noted that there exists another local text, named *Kulāntpīṭh*,¹³ which is a local Sanskrit *māhātmya*, a textual genre that narrates the mythical glory of a place or a god.¹⁴ This text provides some geographical information on the region, but is dedicated mainly to narrating the mythical past of important local goddesses and gods

¹³ A published version of this text, which is not easy to come by, can be found in (Vasiṣṭh 2006: 235-254).

¹⁴ Shabab nicely explains the meaning of this name: "Etymologically, it is composed of Kula-Anta-Pitha, the territory which marks the end of Kula—the socioreligious system of the mainland. Penelope Chetwode has translated it as "End of the Habitable World", a title of her book on Kullu" (Shabab 1996: 23).

and sheds very little light on historical matters. “The scholars,” writes Tobdan, “do not find the work to be of much use as a historical document” (Tobdan 2000: 6). In any case, the circulation of the text is very limited and none of my informants in Manali possessed a copy of it.

And yet, based on the materials we do have, a few general observations can be made about the history of the region. Kullu Valley, a mountainous area quite distant from the cultural and political centers of the plains, has been the center of a kingdom bearing the same name, whose size has changed and boundaries have fluctuated throughout the years. The capital of the kingdom has shifted several times, from Jagatsukh to Nagar and then to Sultanpur, where it remains today (in the present-day town of Kullu). An important trade route between Tibet and Kinnaur, the valley came under heavy influence of the neighboring kingdoms of Mandi, Chamba, Lahul, Spiti, and even Ladakh and Tibet. Military encounters between these powers occurred several times throughout history and the Kullu Kingdom underwent periods of supremacy and expansion as well as of contraction and subjugation following these engagements.¹⁵

¹⁵ Throughout this work the reader will surely notice the relative paucity of published Hindi materials on which I draw. Of course, my research in the field was conducted almost entirely in Hindi and Pahari and almost all the conversations quoted in the dissertation were conducted in these languages. Yet when it came to scholarly works, I could hardly find any relevant publications on the region in Hindi or Pahari. This, I soon realized, was not only my experience but that of other scholars working here as well. Berti (2001), for example, cites only two Hindi entries in her bibliography and mentions none in Berti (2006). Brigitte Luchesi, who writes on Haḍimbā and Manu Ṛṣi (Luchesi 2006) cites only one Hindi piece and Peter Sutherland, who writes on Pahari culture in the West Himalayas, mentions none (Sutherland 2004, 2006). Elizabeth Smaller, whose PhD thesis on Vashisht village I consulted but did not address directly in my dissertation, also does not cite any work in Hindi (Smaller 1997). Hindi works are not often addressed by scholars based at Simla University either, who themselves tend to publish in English. Thus, for example, the historian Chetan Singh does not cite even one Hindi work in his *Natural Premises* (Singh 1998) and in an edited volume by Laxman Thakur (Thakur 2002) I counted no more than fifteen Hindi sources cited in about twenty-four articles together. In a personal conversation with Professor Thakur he explained that given the wider readership in English he usually encourages his students to publish in that language rather than in Hindi. Even William Sax, who has written extensively on the Western Himalaya, hardly references any Hindi sources in his publications. In his *Mountain Goddess* (Sax 1991), for example, he mentions only five books and two newspaper articles in Hindi; in *Dancing the Self* (Sax 2002) he cites six books; and in *God of Justice* (Sax 2009) he references only one Hindi work. The one exception I could find is Mark

Hutchison and Vogel note that “the oldest authentic historical reference to the Hill States is to be found in the records of the Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsiang [Xuanzang], who visited India in A.D. 629 and remained till 644” (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 3). Xuanzang “describes the country of *K’iu-lu-to* as situated at 700 *li*, i.e., 117 miles, to the north-east of Jalandhara, which exactly corresponds with the position of Kuluta, with which, as Sir A. Cunningham says, the Chinese rendering of *K’iu-lu-to* is identical” (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 417). The information provided by Xuanzang is quite limited but he does mention a Buddhist stupa that was built in the middle of the valley by the famous emperor Ashoka. Whereas the stupa is no longer to be found, this, and other findings, lead Hutchison and Vogel to conclude that “(i)t would thus appear that Buddhism once flourished in Kulu, though it has now practically disappeared from the valley. The only symbol remaining being a stone image of Avalokitesvara, in a temple of Kapila-muni, at Kelat, some miles north of Sultanpur [Kullu town]” (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 418).

A period of *thakurain* (Thakurs) then followed, when local petty kings and chieftains—Thakurs and Ranas—ruled small tracts of land comprising a few villages each. These rulers “waged war, levied taxes and transit duties like so many German barons,” (Lyll 1874: 107) and were not remembered as particularly just.¹⁶ Ruins of

Elmore, who cites about twenty-five Hindi pieces in his dissertation (Elmore 2005). However, about eleven of those references are to newspaper clips and several of the books he mentions are hearings of the Legislative Assembly. In short, and as far as I can tell, it seems that the main scholarly work on Kullu Valley and Himachal Pradesh is published in languages other than Hindi and that so far there is no significant body of scholarly work done here in this language.

¹⁶ Lyll, who was Assistant Commissioner of Kulu, reports an old rhyme that was sung to him once by a Brahman at Nagar and which was said to refer to a Thakur of Nagar named Busil: “Twelve pumpkins, eighteen octroi [tax] collectors. Busil, the king, does not know what justice is.” Lyll explains that this is the “complaint of a man who had brought twelve pumpkins to [the] market. The king had eighteen octroi collectors; twelve took one pumpkin each as his due and the other six followed him, dunning for the dues of six more” (Lyll 1874: 107).

several of their forts can still be found across the valley. The *thakurain* era ended with the arrival of Rajputs from the plains, who gradually took over the valley and established the rule of Rajas (kings). The latter reigned over larger territories and integrated the local Ranas and Thakurs into their administration. One such ruler was Sidh Singh, who, according to a famous local story, came up from the plains in the 16th century and, with the help of the goddess Haḍimbā, overthrew the malevolent Piti Thakur and took hold of the valley. The figure of Sidh Singh is often conflated with another figure, an earlier king named Bihangmani Pal, who is considered the founding father of an even earlier dynasty that had ruled the valley before the arrival of Sidh Singh. It is hard to tell whether Bihangmani Pal was indeed a historical figure since he is only mentioned in the *Vaṃśāvalī* and according to some calculations must have lived as early as the first or second century CE.

Of the rulers who came after Sidh Singh, whose decedents still live in the valley today and enjoy special status in the eyes of locals, two are worth mentioning: Sidh Singh's son, Bahadur Singh, who in the 16th century expanded the kingdom considerably and built the famous temple to the goddess Haḍimbā in the village of Dhungri; and Jagat Singh, who in the 17th century shifted the capital to Kullu and introduced the worship of Raghunāth Jī in the valley. Suffering from a great illness that was brought on him following a murder of a Brahmin, Jagat Singh was advised to bring the statue of Raghunāth Jī (Lord Rāma) from Oudh, and install him as the patron deity of the royal dynasty and the presiding deity of the valley. Kullu's famous annual Daśahrā festival was inaugurated at that time to celebrate the arrival of Raghunāth Jī and to establish his supremacy over the other deities of the valley. Jagat Singh is thus often remembered as the one who introduced Vaisnavism to the Kullu Valley. Interestingly, he was also the

recipient of several official letters issued by the Mughal court, twelve under the seal of Dara Shikoh and one from Aurangzeb.

By the end of the 18th century, the Gurkhas of Nepal took hold of several neighboring regions, and the Kullu kings had to pay them tribute. In 1810, Sikh forces advanced into Kullu and also demanded a tribute, which was indeed paid. In 1813, when a second demand for tribute was refused, the Sikhs “plundered the capital and looted the treasury. The Raja fled up the mountains to Bangla village, but ultimately had to pay a much larger sum to free the country from the invaders” (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 469). The defeat of the Gurkhas by the British in 1815 marked the beginning of colonial rule over much of the West Himalaya. Having defeated the Sikh armies in 1846, the British took over the Kullu district as well. An Assistant Commissioner, subordinate to the Deputy Commissioner in Kangra, was appointed and established his headquarters in the old castle in Nagar that was built by Sidh Singh in the 16th century. Thakur Singh, the raja of Kullu at the time (1841-52), retained his title and was allowed to exercise sovereign powers within his Jagir, but upon his death in 1852, his son was denied these privileges since he was the son of a household maiden. His title was lowered to that of a Rai and his sovereign powers were drastically slashed. They were abolished completely after Independence by the Punjab Government in 1954.

The British Assistant Commissioners enjoyed the powers of revenue collectors and it was under them that several new revenue settlements were made. With each new settlement, the fields were “demarcated [and] measured, field maps drawn up and accurate land records prepared with a copy supplied to each landholder” (Shabab 1996: 44). Much of the knowledge we now have of the Kullu Valley was produced by these Assistant Commissioners—such as J.B. Lyall (1862-3), A.F.P. Harcourt (1869-71), and

A.E. Diack (1887-90, 91)—who wrote books and gazetteers on the region. Other producers of knowledge were British travelers—such as William Moorcroft and George Trebeck (Moorcroft and Trebeck 1841), Alexander Cunningham (Cunningham 1848), H. Calvert, and C.G. Bruce (Bruce 1934)—several of whom came here in hope of hunting bears, for which the Kullu Valley was particularly known at the time. Several British officers acquired considerable landed property in the valley but sold it before the promulgation of Independence. Two exceptions were C.R. Johnson and A.T. Banon, who had married locally and whose descendants still live in Manali today. After independence, Kullu remained a subdivision of the Kangra district until 1963, when it was made a separate district. In 1966 it was merged with the Himachal Pradesh Union Territory, which became a state on January 25, 1971.

Religion in the Kullu Valley is comprised of both unique and more common elements. It goes back thousands of years, with the earliest references to the region made in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa.¹⁷ The oldest stone temples in the valley are dated to the seventh or eighth century C.E.¹⁸ The worship of ancient divinities, such as *nāgas* (snakes and serpents), *nārāyaṇs* (rain-bestowing deities),¹⁹ *nāginīs* (female serpents), and *joginīs* (female, often demonic forest-spirits), is still widespread in the valley, alongside

¹⁷ In these early texts—often dated to as early as the later centuries of the first millennium B.C.E—Kullu is referred to in its old name “Kuluta.” This name also appears on a coin dated to the first or second century C.E. that reads: “Rajna Kolutasya Virayasasya” - Virayasaya, king of Kuluta, or of the Kulutas (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 415).

¹⁸ Chetwode (1968: 925). Earlier temples, which must have been built of wood, did not survive.

¹⁹ The term *nārāyaṇ* should not be confused with the identical well-known designation of the god Viṣṇu in Vaisnavism. According to Vogel, “the term ‘Nārāyaṇ’ is employed in these hill-tracts to designate a being closely related to a Nāg.” (Vogel 1972: 255) an association that is attested in the famous local saying about the deities in Kullu: “*ṭhārā nāga, ṭhārā nārāyaṇ*”—“eighteen (or “many”) serpents, eighteen *nārāyaṇs*.” Nowadays, however, people often identify local *nārāyaṇs* as manifestations of Lord Viṣṇu. Tobdan, for example, states this explicitly: “Narayan, of course, stands for Vishnu who is worshipped as a god in many villages” (Tobdan 2000: 15).

the veneration of other goddesses and gods—*devī devtā*, as they are called collectively. Scholars argue that throughout history, many of these and other autochthonous divinities underwent a processes of Brahminization in which they were identified and gradually absorbed into figures from the pan-Indian pantheon. This explains the large number of Vedic seers that are worshiped in the region, since from earliest times, the remote Himalayan region had been perceived a perfect home for sages and wandering ascetics, who came here for contemplation and meditation. In the process of the Brahmanic assimilation of local deities it thus made sense to equate local divinities with these ancient seers (Handa 2001: 49-94).²⁰ Also famous in these mountains are the five Pāṇḍava brothers, the renowned heroes of the Mahābhārata, who are believed to have roamed these forests on several occasions. The worship of the Pāṇḍavas—and in some places of their archenemies the Kauravas, as well—is quite popular all across the Himalaya. As noted above, traces of Buddhism, mostly of its Tibetan branch, can also be found in the valley and if one crosses the Rohtang Pass, towards the valleys of Lahul and Spiti, such influences become even more apparent, with a considerable section of the population there following Buddhism.

In terms of rituals and religious practices, three things are worth noting with regard to the Kullu Valley—its sacred places of worship, periodic processions, and possession rites. *Devtā sthāns* (place of gods) are widespread across the valley and can be found not only in every village, but in the surrounding forests, on mountain slopes and tops, near rivers and other water bodies as well. Such *devtā sthāns* are often marked with a sacred rock, a stone, a tree or a statue, and are decorated with cloths, paint and often

²⁰ I will further examine the question of Brahmanization in this region in chapter 1.

with metal pieces, such as knives and sickles. In terms of architecture, they are usually kept quite simple and if a more elaborate structure is built at the site the designation *devtā sthān* would refer to the place of the original location or object. Local people worship these places on a regular basis, and celebrate annual festivals that are associated with them. Typically, villagers visit the *devtā sthān*, worship the deity, sacrifice a sheep or a goat to the enshrined deity, and conclude with a communal feast. Several of these places have developed throughout the years and have been made into elaborate structures and temples. In such cases, the *sthān* is often kept in its original form with the new structure built around it. In recent years, with the new wealth pouring into the valley following the introduction of cash-crop agriculture and tourism, villagers can afford to renovate such places more rapidly. At the same time, less successful *sthāns* fall into decay and may be forgotten. This could explain why it not unusual in the Kullu Valley for old *mūrtis* (statues) to emerge out of the ground unexpectedly, in someone's field or in a forest grove. When this happens, locals mark the place and worship it as a new-old *devtā sthān*.

Important deities in the Kullu Valley often manifest themselves in a movable form known as *rath* or *pālkī* (chariot, palanquin). This structure is made of a wooden chair, decorated with cloths, jewelry, silver and gold paraphernalia, flowers, and, most importantly, *mohrās*—metal masks that represent the different deities who populate the *rath*. The palanquins vary in size, decoration and the number of masks that cover them, but they are all carried on people's shoulders from place to place and believed to be controlled by the deities themselves. The different components constituting the structure are normally kept in the village treasury (*madhār*),²¹ and are assembled before important

²¹ *Bhaṇḍār* in Hindi.

occasions or when the village deity travels to festivals in nearby villages. A uniquely local custom is that of inviting the goddesses and gods home, to thank them for extraordinary help they have granted or major blessings they have bestowed on the household. On such occasions the *rath* spends the whole day in the devotee's house, during which consultations with the deity's possessed medium take place, sheep are sacrificed, alcohol is poured out generously, and several meals are served to scores of guests. During the Daśahrā festival, hundreds such palanquins are carried to the town of Kullu from all across the valley, where they camp for a week and pay obedience to Lord Raghunāth Jī, the presiding deity of the valley. When such events are concluded, the *rath* is carried back to the temple, worshipped again, and finally taken apart. The different components are solemnly returned to the treasury house, and are kept there until the next time around.



Figure 4: Haḍimbā Devī’s and Manu Ṛṣi’s palanquin carried on devotees’ shoulders. Photo by Udi Halperin.

Of all the characteristics of religion in the Kullu Valley, the most distinctive probably involves the ongoing dialogues taking place here between the people and their gods. Each goddess and god has a male medium—called either *celā* (disciple) or *gur* (possibly from *guru*, master)—who functions as the deity’s mouthpiece. The *celā*, chosen for this position by the deity himself or herself,²² goes into trance and channels the deity in front of the engaged audience. The gods in Kullu are thus invoked on numerous occasions and speak to their people on a regular basis. Predicting the future, solving disputes, and offering advice and instructions on both private and public difficulties—the *devī devtā* are constantly there, playing a pivotal role in their devotees’ lives. During

²² I will elaborate on the ritual procedures involved in possession in the final chapter of the dissertation.

these consultation sessions (*pūchnā*—asking), villagers are not mere listeners, but active participants in the discussion. They talk to the gods, argue with them, and sometimes even challenge them or condition their worship on the god’s compliance in the discussed case. Locals are normally quite interested in these godly messages, especially when important issues are discussed. On such occasions, hundreds of people gather, including women and children, and listen to the words of the gods. Similar consultations take place in smaller circles as well, when, for example, a household *gur* channels the family god, who discusses private matters with family members.

Of the central deities in the valley, we have already mentioned Raghunāth Jī, the presiding deity of Kullu and the personal god of the local royal family. Another important god is Bijlī Mahādev—Śiva of lightning—whose temple is located on a mountain top just above the confluence of the Beas and Parvati streams. His *rath* is probably the largest and heaviest in the valley and he receives much respect from villagers as they encounter him carried in his *rath* on his devotees’ shoulders. Jamlu, or Jamadagni Ṛṣi, the fierce and powerful god of Melana village, is probably the strangest and most feared of all the gods in the region. Like his followers, he lives high up in the mountain, speaks a nearly forgotten ancient language, and has many traditional privileges. Sharbari Mā, the presiding goddess of Shuru, is also an important deity, who is considered a manifestation of the goddess Pārvatī, Lord Śiva’s consort. She holds weekly consultation sessions and her *gur* is quite famous in the region.

Haḍimbā Devī, the goddess who stands at the center of this dissertation, is an important deity whose wooden temple is located in the midst of a deodar grove near the village of Dhungri, just outside the town of Manali. Haḍimbā, who is believed to be a character in the epic of the Mahābhārata and a manifestation of the goddesses Durgā and

Kālī, is a powerful *devī* who, according to local stories, had crowned the founding father of the local royal dynasty. Because of this, the raja of Kullu and the members of his family still address Haḍimbā as *dādī* (grandmother). They also commemorate the blessing she had bestowed on the family by continuing to honor the special privileges she enjoys during the annual Daśahrā festival, which was introduced in the valley in the 17th century. In recent years, Haḍimbā’s temple has turned into a major attraction for the hordes of tourists coming up from the plains, and it is visited by hundreds and sometimes thousands of visitors every day. Haḍimbā shares her palanquin with the god Manu Ṛṣi—the presiding deity of Old Manali village—and it is in his temple and treasury that their *rath* is kept when it is not in use. Whenever the two deities embark on a procession, the palanquin is built in Manu’s temple and the two deities are ritually invited to enter it. Manu Ṛṣi, who is considered by his followers to be humanity’s first man, is believed to have landed here in his boat, having survived the great primeval deluge. These, and the other great many deities that are worshipped in this region, must have contributed to how the valley is popularly known today among locals and tourists alike: The Valley of Gods.²³

Recent Transformations

In the past few decades the Kullu Valley has witnessed far-reaching transformations. Already in the 1950s Y.S. Parmar, who would later become the first Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, identified the state’s relative isolation as the root cause for its economic problems. He therefore allocated more than 50% of the region’s

²³ Elmore notes that the designation “Valley of Gods” is often ascribed to Himachal Pradesh as a whole. He identifies this as one of five primary narratives that have been used by the state and local writers to establish a Himachali identity (Elmore 2005: 276-359).

annual budget to the development of roads and communication networks.²⁴ His efforts soon gained important support from the central Indian government, when, following the Chinese incursion into the eastern Himalayas in 1962, officials realized the pressing strategic need for a reliable road system in this neighboring region. Thus, whereas “in 1948 there were barely 200 kilometers of navigable roads in the entire region,” in 2005 the department of public works reported it had “over 23,000 kilometers of roadway.”²⁵

The expanding transportation infrastructure significantly eased the flow of goods in and out of the region and eventually led to an agrarian paradigm shift across the state. Farmers shifted from subsistence to commercial agriculture, substituting traditional crops with new more marketable ones. Apples, which were popularized in the region already in 1904 by a missionary worker named Samuel Stokes, soon became the most important commercial fruit grown in H.P., which today accounts for almost 90% of the total food production in the state (Jreat 2004: 58). In Kullu Valley, where conditions are especially favorable, apple cultivation has become “the icon of the horticultural revolution” (Coward 2003: 6).

The horticultural revolution, however, is only one aspect of the economic paradigm shift that has taken place in H.P. in recent decades. The state’s government, realizing the huge touristic potential of the region,²⁶ has invested significantly in promoting this industry. The simultaneous decline of tourism in Kashmir, caused by the

²⁴ Elmore (2005: 185). In 1948 H.P. came into being as Chief Commissioner’s Province, and then, in 1956, it became a Union Territory. It turned into a state only in 1971. See Balokhra (2007: 107-12).

²⁵ Quoted in Elmore (2005: 185).

²⁶ Jreat summarizes H.P.’s touristic potential as follows: “Spectacular mountain scenery, healthy climate, diverse flora and fauna, varied culture, traditional art and crafts, pilgrimage centers, and opportunities for adventure sports activities such as mountaineering, trekking, paragliding, fishing, river rafting and skiing, etc.” (Jreat 2004: 132).

growing political disturbances in that region, has also contributed to the steady increase of tourist influx. The Kullu Valley soon became one of H.P.'s most highly prized tourist destination—second only to Simla—and the town of Manali has become the state's most touristic town.²⁷ The earlier shift to cash-crops had already signaled the introduction of a capitalist economy in the region. Accumulation of wealth has become easier; opportunities opened up for small-scale farmers; and the local economy was integrated into that of the rest of the country. Yet it was tourism that marked the real fundamental transformation. Chabu, the owner of a successful restaurant in Manali town, told me once about the early days of tourism in Manali with glittering eyes. This is how I described what he said in my field diary:

He [Chabu] said that the real money started arriving in the valley with the Indian tourists, in 1989. People made thousands of rupees a day. There were problems in Kashmir so they [the government] diverted tourism here [to Manali]. People simply invented prices and the tourists paid it in full. It was a bonanza time. People made in a day what they used to make in a year! Thousands of rupees.... This was THE TIME! [Chabu said:] *Vah Vah* brother, so much money, people just made tons of money, more and more; it just kept coming and coming.²⁸

While many of Manali's surrounding villages benefited from the tourist boom, the residents of Old Manali village—where I myself resided during my field research—were particularly successful. In the past two decades the village has turned into a thriving hub for international backpackers, boasting dozens of guesthouses, restaurants, clothing and souvenir shops, internet cafés, travel agencies, and a host of other tourist services. In the

²⁷ Manali receives a staggering 180.17 points on the Tourist Function Index (T(f)), which measures the “tourist intensity of activity as reflected in the juxtaposition of two populations, the tourist and the host population” (Jreat 2004: 161). For comparison, Dalhousie, which receives the second highest marking on this index, gets only 17.64 points, while Simla gets 3.74 points. These statistics are taken from a table in Jreat (2004: 164).

²⁸ Field diary March 19, 2010, note 1. This is my account of Chabu's description, which I wrote down shortly after our conversation. While not exactly a quote, most of my description is based on the exact sentences he used and kept repeating.

height of summer the village greets thousands of travelers, who in certain times amount to more than half of the village's native population. Many here have given up agriculture altogether and tapped into the tourism market. Houses were converted into guesthouses, restaurants emerged on agricultural plots, and empty spaces were rented for makeshift shops and cafés. Opportunities opened up even for those who owned only small plots of land, or whose land was not so well located. Many of them became trekking guides, taxi drivers, vendors of local handicrafts, and even ski instructors during the snowy winter season. The introduction of roads, tourists, vast wealth and, later on, new technologies and media, was accompanied by new ideas, fashion and modes of behavior that have substantially changed life in the region. Capitalist modernity has thus been introduced in to the region in an aggressive manner and in a relatively short span of time, and has caused sweeping changes in all areas of life.



Figure 5: Guesthouses in Old Manali village. Photo by Udi Halperin.

Two examples nicely illustrate the extent and complexity of these changes in Kullu. The first concerns Ramuram, who was the oldest living person in Dhungri village until he recently passed away in the age of 95. Ramuram—who once admitted that he had never been to Delhi and that the farthest place he ever reached was Mandi, only a three-hour drive away—enjoyed questioning me about the world outside Manali. He asked about Israel and the US, flight tickets' prices, and agricultural produce grown around the world. One afternoon, when we were sitting and chatting in his balcony, he asked me whether I knew where Japan was. I replied that though I never visited Japan myself, I did know that it was located roughly north-east of India. Ramuran was not satisfied and requested me to point the direction to Japan with my hand. Calculating where the north was, I raised my hand and pointed to where I figured was the direction of Japan. Looking at my raised hand, Ramuram noted: “Oh, so you mean that Japan is somewhere beyond Vashisht.” Realizing that I was indeed pointing towards the general direction of the village of Vashisht, I saw no reason not to confirm Ramuram’s deduction. “Yes,” I replied, “Japan is somewhere beyond the village of Vashisht!” To me, this moment captured much of what I was witnessing in Manali on many different levels. An old man, who lived all his life in a highly localized world, where the walls of the valley were pretty much the borders of one’s world, has been exposed to the rest of the globe in a matter of years. Technology, tourism, and media have made him not only aware, but also open and curious about the globe. Yet in some fundamental way he has remained rooted in the local world in which directions of places are still indicated with hand gestures, in relation to nearby villages.

The second episode took place not on the ground but in the virtual space of Facebook. Raj, who owns a coffee shop in Old Manali (with excellent coffee, I should

note), uploaded a photo of a huge traffic jam on the road leading to the Rohtang Pass. He titled the photo: “Shall we love it or hate it?” Though many of Manali’s youth have Facebook accounts these days, most of the responses were of domestic and foreign travelers whom Raj has befriended throughout the years. Their comments moved from trying to locate the exact place of the scene, through asking why the jam was so long, to commenting on the question itself. One reply in particular caught my attention, as it seemed to capture what was underlying Raj’s question: “of cours to love it my dear raji, cos there r on the way to manaly, means lots of money hahaha” (all the spelling mistakes and abbreviations are in the original). Mountain scenery, traffic jams, digital technology, and money, all come together here in an online dialogue that concerns the benefits and drawbacks of the rapid introduction of the global into the local in the Kullu Valley.

Roadmap to the Journey Ahead

These comprehensive transformations should be kept in mind when reading the pages that lie ahead. I examine the ways in which they are intertwined in almost every aspect of worship of the goddess Haḍimbā and in the lives of her devotees. I show how many of these changes are interpreted in light of the existing religious ideology and engaged through the traditional practices and ritual mechanisms in which the goddess occupies a central place. Haḍimbā is at the heart of her devotees’ attempts to make sense of their contemporary reality, resist many aspects of it, and embrace others. Whereas both Haḍimbā and her devotees are also changing in the process, it seems that one thing remains stable—their commitment to each other. Villagers do sometimes complain about a decline in religious participation, yet the reality on the ground is often quite different—youth are highly engaged; new wealth fuels a higher volume of religious activity; and old

practices are performed with an ever growing vengeance. Haḍimbā is still highly revered by her devotees, who attribute much of the improvements in their life to her. In a world where festivals, public and private rituals, processions, and possession rites are frequent, well attended, and at the heart of villagers' lives, the goddess still reigns supreme.

In what follows I examine all these phenomena closely. The dissertation is comprised of three somewhat lengthy chapters each of them revolves around a single topic, which I try to examine from several, often diverse, angles. Chapter 1 is an attempt to answer the rather simple question: “Who is Haḍimbā Devī?” Whereas the question is simple, the answer turns out to be much more complex. Probing the rather scarce available sources, I discuss the difficulties in uncovering Haḍimbā's history, yet offer a few insights into her recent as well as less recent past. In particular, I examine the ways in which the goddess' image has been shaped in the past few decades, as well as the forces that have been working in the process from both within and without. Haḍimbā, as we will see, sports a multilayered personality and has several distinctly different faces, which come to the foreground depending upon context. I focus in this chapter on Haḍimbā's most popular face—that of a famous Mahābhārata demoness—and on the ways in which it is fashioned within the context of tourism, where it is most popular. I examine the apparent conflict between tradition and modernity that comes to light in this determined foregrounding of the ancient in a setting that is so obviously new, and go on to highlight the creative solutions that Haḍimbā's priests and devotees offer to conflicts between old and new.

In chapter 2 I discuss one of Haḍimbā's most controversial rituals—that of the buffalo sacrifice. This ritual, which has been performed in honor of the goddess for centuries, is now under heavy attack from all sorts of critics: tourists, state officials,

police officers, and media correspondents. Yet not only is this practice not on the wane, but its frequency has been on the rise for several years. Analyzing the ritual from various perspectives, I show how it functions at one and the same time as a mechanism for interpreting contemporary reality and for acting on this reality in an attempt to restore metaphysical as well as social order. The ritual also opens up a discursive space that enables locals to reflect on their lives, express their concerns, and then address them through corrective ritual performances. Finally, I show that the buffalo sacrifice serves as a ground for a real struggle between locals and outsiders over both agency and identity. As such, the present conflict is but the contemporary phase in a prolonged debate that has been going on in India for millennia. It is in this blood-soaked context that Haḍimbā's Kālī face comes to the fore. Here too, the foregrounding of a pan-Indian aspect of her personality creates novel difficulties that need to be engaged by her devotees.

In the third chapter, I examine the local discourse on and ritual engagement with the rapid ecological changes that have transpired in the region in recent years. An observable increase in temperatures is being interpreted in Kullu through religious paradigms and is understood to be intimately intertwined with human activity and moral conduct. A careful analysis of locals' interpretations of and responses to these changes reveals their confusion, ambivalence, and doubt. At the same time, an underlying tendency can be observed—whereas locals are still confident that their meteorological reality is determined locally, as a result of their own behavior and the doings of their gods, creeping doubts make their way in, and so do concerns that the contemporary developments are the result of the working of much bigger powers over which both locals and their gods have much less control. Under these conditions, discussions about climate

change, as well as the actions taken to counter it, reveal in surprising depth a true ideological struggle, a battle for agency in a rapidly globalizing world.

Each of the chapters focuses on one of the “theaters of change” where one can with special clarity observe the processes by means of which Haḍimbā is “becoming herself.” These theaters, however, differ from one another. The first—in which Haḍimbā’s role in the Mahābhārata epic is foregrounded (ch. 1)—reveals a set of contestations concerning her identity, which have been working themselves out for almost two hundred years, so far as we can tell. The second (ch. 2) deals with a central theme in the realm of goddess studies, whereby the practice of sacrifice—specifically buffalo sacrifice—is put on trial by all-Indian understandings of what constitutes true religion. The third (ch. 3) highlights deliberations over Haḍimbā’s place in a dramatic transformation that unfolds in the present moment: climate change. Thus, while three separate aspects—or “faces”—of the goddess are explored in these chapters, they also provide perspective on processes of change. In all of them we perceive challenges put not only to Haḍimbā Devī, but to other goddesses in various parts of India.

Importantly, in these three “theaters” it is not only Haḍimbā’s identity that is being refashioned but that of her devotees as well. The people of the Kullu Valley, who constantly interact with their goddesses and gods through rituals and possession ceremonies, are thus redefining themselves no less than they are refiguring their deities. The chapters ahead also describe arenas for action and reflection that center on Haḍimbā but simultaneously enable devotees to negotiate their own identity and agency. These three arenas, then, are revealed as grounds for struggles over ideas, practices and ways of being in which the encounter between old and new, periphery and center, and tradition and capitalist modernity is played out. What is unique about these arenas is that they are

all intimately connected with the goddess Haḍimbā. To put it more broadly, religion in the Kullu Valley—the ideological and ritual world it constitutes—provides the cognitive and practical framework for engaging with the host of changes introduced in the valley in recent years.

Each of the three chapters portrays a particular outcome. The first reveals that despite pressures put by the Himachal Pradesh state, the Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Cooperation (HPTDC), and the visiting tourists, Haḍimbā is not succumbing to a pan-Indian Purāṇic framework of reference but rather retains, and even celebrates, her unique place within another encompassing cultural narrative—that of the Mahābhārata epic. The second chapter illustrates how both Haḍimbā and her people refuse to forsake their age-old tradition of animal sacrifice, even though they realize it is considered illegitimate by a large number of Indians and that it marks them as backward and irrational. Instead of forsaking this practice and succumbing to competing religious ideology, they criticize this ideology and celebrate their own in grand buffalo sacrifices whose frequency only rises. These rituals are perfectly suited for protecting tradition since, as elsewhere in India, they are often performed with the aim of restoring a desired cosmic and earthly order. The third chapter reveals the ideological struggles triggered by the changing climate. Whereas old paradigms for explaining and controlling the weather conditions endure, new ideas make their way in and challenge the old ones in a variety of ways. It soon becomes clear that on this issue Haḍimbā's devotees are still undecided. The spectrum of answers offered to the question of who controls the weather reveals a great deal of confusion and a growing uncertainty. At the same time, it is clear that the new interpretations do not eradicate the old ones, but combine with them to create a new hybrid worldview.

This work is situated within two major scholarly fields. One is the study of Indian feminine divinities, an area of research that has burgeoned since the 1970s, principally owing to new interest brought about by feminist scholarship. A formative role was also played by the growth of “area studies” curricula and research institutions at about the same time, with their vigorous support of new field research in South Asia. Both these factors heightened awareness of the “village Hinduism” in which goddesses particularly thrive. My research on Haḍimbā, who until now had never been systematically studied, expands this growing field of scholarship by contributing the example of a contemporary Himalayan village goddess who is under a significant pressure to change.

The second field to which this study contributes is the one increasingly called “lived Hinduism.” Unlike the general run of earlier anthropological studies, this emerging field attempts to situate local practices in a pan-Indian perspective, yet without perpetuating the earlier Indological dependence on Sanskrit texts and elite Brahmanic viewpoints. It emphasizes popular beliefs, practices and oral cultures—the field of behaviors and attitudes that scholars now call “on-the-ground,” practical, or simply “lived.”²⁹ My project contributes to this field by focusing on the challenges posed to traditional practices and worldview by modern institutions and discourses and on the ways in which both “sides” of the interaction are fundamentally altered in the process. In the broadest sense, my dissertation furthers our understanding of the encounter between rural societies and capitalist modernity, as well as the role of religion in shaping this encounter. It shows that while religious ideals, beliefs, and practices are challenged in the

²⁹ See, for example, Narayanan (2000), Hawley and Narayanan (2006), Fuller (1992), and Grieve (2006). Outside the field of Indology, see Hall (1997).

process, so far they are not only retained but also provide the most encompassing frame of reference from which to interpret and engage these rising new powers.

CHAPTER ONE: Haḍimbā of the Mahābhārata

Introduction: Wife of Bhīm, Mother of Ghaṭotkaca.

Haḍimbā's temple is located in the midst of a deodar grove just outside the village of Dhungri. One can walk up here from the town of Manali by taking a somewhat steep staircase that climbs through a pleasant greenwood. Many, however, are either unaware of this option, or wish to avoid the 15-minute walk on the busy road that leads to the grove, and prefer arriving in the temple by taxi, rickshaw or car. They park, or are dropped off, in one of three small parking lots and from there proceed to the temple on foot.

Coming from the main upper parking, visitors must first walk through a fairly big open ground where thousands of devotees gather every year in May to participate in the goddess' birthday festival. For three days they sit on the stone bleachers on both sides of the field and watch the palanquins of the visiting gods carried on people's shoulders, traditional dancing, and even volleyball contests between teams of local youth. In the rest of the year, however, the bleachers are populated with hawkers and makeshift stalls, where one can buy all sorts of souvenirs—from Chinese-made plastic Buddha statues, through local hand-made woolen socks and painted wooden door-signs, to potency-enhancing *silajit* cream³⁰ and 8GB pen drives. At the center of the ground one can ride yaks, have one's photo taken wearing traditional Pahari (mountain) clothes, or be flown in the air in a theme-park trampoline-like device. At the end of the field one enters a two-hundred meter path stretched across the deodar grove, at the end of which stands the temple.

³⁰ Silajit, or Shilajit, is a wax-like mixture of minerals, usually brown or black in color, which in Manali is sold mainly by traders from Rajasthan. These traders guarantee their customers good health and enhanced sexual performance if they will use it.



Figure 6: Haḍimbā Temple. Photo by Udi Halperin.

Haḍimbā's temple is a pagoda-like structure made of wood and whitewashed, mud-covered stonework. It has three square roofs covered with timber tiles and a fourth cone-shaped copper one on top with a round metal ball and a small royal umbrella as pinnacle. The structure is surrounded by a wooden balcony on three sides, and the front façade is covered with various wooden carvings. The entrance gate, situated behind a newly installed metal grill, is fairly small and made of heavy wood. During the summer months, the height of the tourist season, one needs to wait in line for at least an hour in order to get in. The line of people has a life of its own and it follows different routes every day. Since there are no rails, ropes or guiding signs, the visitors line up differently every hour: across the yard, around the temple, along the path or down the stairs. Newlywed-couples, vacationing families, elderly Bengalis and hip Delhi youth, young children on an annual school trip, and funny-dressed foreign backpackers—all are

crammed here together, waiting for their turn to worship the *mātā* (mother, the goddess). A few take off their shoes while already standing in line, others do so just as their turn to enter arrives. They are all well-dressed, occasionally crying “*jai mātā kī*” (victory to the mother), and continuously clicking their cameras—the results of which can easily be seen by image-googling “Hadimba temple.”

Finally, the visitor arrives in front of the metal grill at the top of which the bars are curved into a sign that reads, in English, “HADIMBA MATA.” Crossing through the grill and mounting the stone slab, one faces the small temple gate and the slow stream of people who are trying to get out. Pushing and pulling a little, one quickly finds oneself inside. After a few seconds, when the eyes get used to the dim light, one can see a huge rock, about four meters high, around which the whole temple is built. At the foot of this rock, a fairly large stone slab that must have broken down from the rock millennia ago creates a small cave in which the goddess is now enshrined. The *pujārī* instructs the people to stay in line and to get down to the cave one by one. However, due to the limited space, this imposed order keeps breaking up. Waiting for their turn, the worshipers can now observe the inside of the temple. Above the cave and a bit further to the back, a square stone slab with a carved image of Durgā Mahiṣāsuramardinī is leaning against the rock. A small oil lamp is burning with a flickering flame in front of it. To the right, a fairly new printed poster of the goddess Kālī is hanging on the wall, and all sorts of metal chains, bowls and tridents, as well as stripes of red cloths, placed on a small shelf underneath it. On the left of the cave a cubical donation box is cemented to the ground, and on to the right a small fire pit (*kuṇḍ*) is filled with burning wood and coals. A few carpets are spread around the pit, and one or two people may sit there and chat. Above the carpets, running across the right wall, is a wide shelf on which lie a few oil cans, red

cloths, brass plates (*thālī*) and a number of curved slaughtering knives. The temple is dark, cold and a bit spooky - a perfect home for the goddess enshrined in the cave below.

In the cave, surrounded by a miniature wooden fence, lies the *piṇḍī* of the temple - a pair of black feet carved into the rock. The feet, marked with several fresh red *ṭīkās*, are surrounded by metal masks, a small *mūrti* of Gaṇeśa, a fairly large oil lamp, strips of red cloth, a few coconuts offered by devotees, and a small pile of money, containing notes and one- or five-rupee coins. “Worship the feet of the *mātā*,” the *pujārī* occasionally guides the worshipers, “and keep moving on.” The latter join their palms, touch the black feet of the mother with one or both hands, and then touch their forehead with the same hand. They wave their open palm over the flickering flame and then slide their hand over their own head, transferring the sacred energy onto themselves and absorbing it. Parents with young children often wave their palms over the children’s heads as well. Leaving a coin or a ten-rupee note in the pile, or placing the coconut and puffed rice they brought with them close to the goddess’ feet, they slide out of the cave, stand up and face the *pujārī*. The latter, sitting on a chair, marks a red *ṭīkā* on their foreheads with a small wooden stick dipped in a small bowl of red paint (*kungū*). He hands the worshippers a handful of puffed rice and a few slices of coconut as *prasād*.³¹

Often at this point, the visitors—the vast majority of whom are Indian tourists who have never been to this temple before—take the opportunity to ask the *pujārī* about the exact identity of the goddess. “She is Haḍimbā Devī of the Mahābhārat,” the *pujārī* answers, “the wife of Bhīm and the mother of Ghaṭotkaca. This is her place of meditation

³¹ Prasād is food that devotees offer to a deity, which is then distributed back to them as a divine gift and blessing. The prasād being sold near Haḍimbā’s temple is usually a coconut and a small bag of puffed rice wrapped in red cloth.

(*tap karnā*).³² The more curious visitors continue to inquire about the age of the site. “The temple is about 500 years old,” the *pujārī* answers, “but the place (*sthān*) is much older, from the time of the Mahābhārat. You can read all about it on the signboards outside.” In the long hours I spent in this temple throughout my field research I witnessed this exchange numerous times. It always followed the same sequence and hardly ever changed. The visitors then turn around and squeeze through the small gate, too often banging their head on its upper wooden beam in what sounds like a skull-cracking blow.

The story of Haḍimbā—also known as Hiḍimbā or Hiḍimbī in other parts of India—is recounted in the Mahābhārata.³³ A fearsome demoness (*rākṣasī*), Haḍimbā used to live in the forest with her cannibal brother Haḍimb. One day, Haḍimb smelled the scent of human flesh and, drooling, he sent his sister to kill and bring the humans over so they could feast on them. Sneaking in on the forest wanderers, Haḍimbā laid her eyes on a group of sleeping people guarded by the most beautiful man she had even seen. She immediately fell in love with the man, thinking he would make a perfect husband for her. As it turned out, the sleeping humans were none other than the renowned Pāṇḍava brothers, who roamed the region with their mother Kuntī just after they had escaped the burning house of lacquer. Haḍimbā, aware of her vulgar, unpleasing appearance, took on a form of a beautiful maiden and revealed herself to the handsome, well-built guard—the second of the five brothers—Bhīm. She disclosed to him that her evil brother Haḍimb was planning to kill and devour him and his companions. As a result, a fierce battle ensued between Bhīm and Haḍimb, at the end of which the latter was slain and lay dead.

³² *Tap karnā*—literally, ‘to create heat’ or ‘to heat up’—means to perform penance or to carry out ascetic practices. However, both *pujārīs* and devotees translate this to English as ‘meditation’ (‘did meditation’).

³³ The Slaying of Hiḍimbā, 1(9)139-144 (Buitenen 1973: 294-302).

Haḍimbā insisted that she should marry Bhīm, and Yudhiṣṭhir, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas, announced that she would be free to spend her days with Bhīm as long as she brought him back before sunset. Having made love all across the Himalaya—in secret corners, thick woods, ponds, and mountain peaks—Haḍimbā gave birth to a giant son named Ghaṭotkaca (shiny-like-a-pot,” baldheaded). When the Pāṇḍavas left, Ghaṭotkaca promised his father that if he ever faced a grave danger, he should only think of his son Ghaṭotkaca, who would immediately come to his rescue. Such an occasion indeed arrived later in the epic, when, during the great Kurukṣetra war, Ghaṭotkaca was summoned by Bhīm to save the Pāṇḍavas from being defeated by the armies of the Kauravas. Eventually, Ghaṭotkaca was killed by a special weapon—a Never-failing Spear³⁴—that was kept by Karṇ for the sole purpose of killing his archenemy Arjun. Karṇ was nevertheless forced to shoot his dart at Ghaṭotkaca, who was about to annihilate the Kaurava forces. Haḍimbā’s son thus sacrificed his own life to save the life of his uncle Arjun, thus making possible the Pāṇḍavas’ victory in the Mahābhārata war.

Most of the Indian tourists visiting Haḍimbā’s temple are familiar with at least the gist of this story. While many of them learn about the exact identity of the goddess only upon visiting the temple, others may have heard about it even before arriving in Manali. In fact, of the several identities ascribed to the goddess enshrined here in the Dhungri temple, Haḍimbā of the Mahābhārata is by far the most popular. Travel agents and guidebooks, tourist websites, official state publications, and scholarly books—none fails to highlight this aspect of Haḍimbā’s identity.³⁵ Tourists who come to Manali without

³⁴ Skt. *amogha śakti*. Van Buitenen translates this as “Never-failing Spear” (Buitenen 1975: 793).

³⁵ Here is, for example, how the temple is presented in Himachal Pradesh Government’s official website: “DHOONGRI TEMPLE: This four tiered pagoda, embellished in finely carved wood, stands sheltered in grove of tall deodar at Manali (Kullu). It is dedicated to Hadimba Devi, wife of the Pandava, Bhim.”

having any prior knowledge of this unique attraction most probably learn about it here, from their hotel receptionists, the taxi drivers, or the hawkers selling their goods in the temple ground. They always get the same answer in response to their inquiries about the identity of the goddess enshrined in this captivating forest temple: “*yeh hai Haḍimbā Mātā, Mahābhārat kī. Bhīm kī patnī. Ghaṭotkaca kī mā*” (“This is Haḍimbā Mātā of the Mahābhārata, Bhīm’s wife and Ghaṭotkaca’s mother.”)

In fact, Ghaṭotkaca is also worshipped in Dhungri as well as in other places in the region, and the visitors coming out of Haḍimbā’s temple often proceed to his tree-shrine situated near the upper parking lot. Paying their respects by joining their hands and bowing their heads until they touch the stone platform surrounding the tree, the tourists often move on to drink a cup of tea or a cold drink in one of the small chai shops scattered around. Some of them stick around for a while longer to enjoy the many attractions. They try to knock down a pyramid of metal glasses with three tennis balls to win 300 rupees, or shoot arrows at a round target. Others take their kids to the adjacent small amusement park or buy them a ride on the yak. They then get back into their cars and drive away to visit the temple of Manu Ṛṣi in Old Manali, after which they proceed to the Club House—a center for indoor and outdoor sports activities—where they play some pool, have a few snacks, and relax.

The chapter that follows examines the identity of Haḍimbā Devī, which, as we will see, does not lend itself to a simple and straightforward narration. I begin by examining available historical materials in an attempt to shed light on the early and more

<http://www.himachal.nic.in/tour/relig.htm> accessed on March 30, 2012. Himachaltourism.org tells the relevant Mahābhārata episode at relative length (<http://www.himachaltourism.org/Haḍimba-temple-manali.html> accessed on March 30, 2012) and Googling “Hadimba temple Manali” yields numerous similar websites. For a presentation of Haḍimbā in printed guidebooks, see, for example, Chaudhry (2007: 213).

recent past of Haḍimbā. The scarcity of available sources makes it hard to narrate a definitive history of the goddess or to determine the exact point in which she became identified with the Mahābhārata figure. Whereas old traditions in the Himalaya seem to suggest an early identification, later colonial accounts reveal that the issue is more complex. I then move on to present Mark Elmore’s thesis concerning the interaction of religion and the state in Himachal Pradesh and the ways in which this has come to bear on the goddess Haḍimbā. As I show, Elmore’s argument is most convincing on a “macro” state-wide level, but things look quite different when examined closely on the ground in Manali. Though, as Elmore shows, there are powerful forces working to assimilate Haḍimbā into the pan-Indian goddess Durgā, local people insist on foregrounding Haḍimbā’s Mahābhārata face instead, and to do so despite the demonic and bloodthirsty associations that accompany it. It is true, however, that this Mahābhārata identification presents residents of Manali with a number of problems, which I detail in the following section. I then discuss the creative theological solutions offered to these problems by Haḍimbā’s *pujārīs* and other devotees. I conclude by showing how the ongoing reconstruction of the identity of the goddess—a process which is at present closely influenced by tourism—is but a contemporary stage in a long process of interaction between periphery and center in Indian religion. The present moment, in which the nascent Indian nation, the creation of a state government for Himachal Pradesh, and a vigorous tourist industry all serve to ask questions about the relation between the Himalayas and the plains—the periphery and the presumed center, the latter explicitly so-called in the case of the national government—is hardly the first such moment in the long history of the Indian subcontinent. Manali natives’ preference for the Mahābhārata as the primary frame of reference for Haḍimbā is one strong indication of that fact—even as

over against the equally pan-Indian orbit provided by the goddess Durga—but it does not solve the problems posed by a “peripheral” view of this relationship.

In Search of Zikr

Although Haḍimbā has many faces, as we have begun to see, there is no doubt about the fact that today she is completely identified with the Mahābhārata *rākṣasī*. This identification is on everybody’s tongue and is questioned by no one. Yet there are some indications that this might not always have been the case. One sunny October morning, when the crowded procession carrying Haḍimbā’s palanquin to the annual Daśahrā festival in the town of Kullu halted at a devotee’s house for a quick rest and a cup of chai, Nisha, Neel’s wife, leaned towards him and whispered something in his ear.³⁶ Neel listened carefully and when Nisha finished he addressed me. She asks, he said, knowing that you study Haḍimbā and all that, if you have any idea why there is no *zikr* of Bhīm in this procession. “*Zikr*?” I asked. Neel explained that given the close relationship between Haḍimbā and Bhīm, one would expect to find *zikr*, some kind of commemoration of Haḍimbā’s and Bhīm’s relationship, enacted throughout the procession: a visit to a Bhīm temple, a halt in some place where a certain event involving Bhīm had taken place, etc.³⁷ At the time, I did not want to tell Neel what I thought about the question so I turned it back to him, asking what *he* thought the answer was. But Neel had no idea. He requested that I ask Haḍimbā’s *pujārīs*, who would surely have an answer. The latter, when I interrogated them about it later, admitted that indeed there was no such *zikr* to be found. This is because Bhīm left the valley, they explained, so there is no local temple for him,

³⁶ Thirty-year old Neel is a good old friend whom I have known since my first visit to Manali in 1995.

³⁷ Zikr [Urdu] translates as remembrance, memory, or commemoration.

nor any ritual or worship of him. They didn't have much else to say about the topic, nor were they too keen to discuss it further. I therefore left it at that.

During my stay in Kullu Valley I came across other issues that raised doubts. Oral accounts of the epic episode, for example, seemed relatively thin, in contrast to what one would expect if the tradition had indeed been developing for centuries. Similarly, there was no ritual event in which the story was told, and actually hardly anyone ever told it. Devotees simply mentioned the fact that Haḍimbā married Bhīm and mothered Ghaṭotkaca but did not elaborate on exactly how this happened or provide any additional details. They often suggested that I watch the relevant episode in the famous TV serial,³⁸ or consult “the books,” in which, they promised, all this “history” was related in great detail.³⁹ Those who did have command of the story, like Haḍimbā's head priest for example, seemed to draw heavily on a pan-Indian telling of the epic rather than on any longstanding local tradition with its own special twists and amplifications. I hardly ever came across any local version of the story or any auxiliary narratives that somehow expanded on or intertwined with it.⁴⁰ I knew that there was one traditional song performed by local women once a year during Haḍimbā's birthday festival and hoped that it would somehow touch on this aspect of her personality. I was later disappointed, however, to learn that it did not. The song, to the extent it was at all remembered—there

³⁸ The TV serial is, of course, B.R. Chopra's famous “Mahābhārat,” which was aired on the Indian state-run television network Doordarshan from 1988 until 1990.

³⁹ Devotees would often use the Sanskrit word “itihās,” or simply the English “history,” when relating to such stories about the past.

⁴⁰ There are, however, a few exceptions. One is a story told me by Khim, about how Ghaṭotkaca once attacked his father, Bhīm, since he did not recognize him as his father. Yet even Khim admitted that this story was not at all famous and, in fact, was revealed to him by only one other person. Other examples of local elaborations of the narrative will be discussed later. As it will be shown there, I take them to be recent rather than early tales.

was much confusion among the singing women concerning the sequence and content of the stanzas—had nothing to say in this regard.

Yet there were indications to the contrary as well. Haḍimbā, as anyone who frequents her festivals can observe, has very close relationships with her son Ghaṭotkaca, who is enshrined in a nearby tree, as I noted above. Her palanquin, believed to be controlled by the goddess herself, visits Ghaṭotkaca's tree quite often and its movement signals the mother's great joy at meeting her son. Haḍimbā herself is also frequently visited by the palanquins of other Ghaṭotkacas, arriving from as far as Banara, almost 100 kilometers away from Manali. At other times, the goddess, speaking to her devotees through her possessed medium, reminds them of the great role played by her son—*merā nandā* (my happiness) as she often calls him—in the Mahābhārata war. And there are the ritual restrictions, as well, put on the movement of Haḍimbā's palanquin when she visits the village of Jagatsukh. The goddess never crosses a certain field located above the shrine of Dhvangan Ṛṣi, who is believed to be Droṇācārya, the famous Brahmin guru of the Pāṇḍavas. Doing so, Haḍimbā's priests explained, would mean grave disrespect towards her husband's guru, and hence this route is avoided by Haḍimbā on her travels.

Materials concerning the history of Kullu, as I have noted above, are scarce and not always reliable. Exploring the history of Haḍimbā's association with the Mahābhārata demoness is not an easy task. In fact, it is almost impossible to say anything certain about the distant, and even not-so-distant, past. It is nevertheless worth a try, since, despite the scanty amount of information, as we will see, there is still something to be learned.

Associations of local traditions with the epic of the Mahābhārata are prevalent throughout the Himalaya. The Pāṇḍava brothers, and sometimes the Kauravas as well (Sax 2000), are worshiped as village deities; specific landmarks are associated with

famous events from the epic; and festivals commemorate the Mahābhārata story and its heroes (Sax 2002). In Jammu, for example, a local tradition tells of a fight that took place there between Arjun and a local king named Babru-vāhan, whom the former did not recognize as his own son from a local *nāga* girl named Ulūpī (Bali 1993: 30). In Sirmaur, Simla and Solan districts, to take another example, the great Mahābhārata war is ritually reenacted during the annual Thoda festival, when members of the Shathas and Pathas—two Rajput communities who associate themselves with the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, respectively—compete in a game that involves a verbal duel and the shooting of arrows at each other’s feet (Thakur 2006: 173).⁴¹ The people of Lakhamandal village in Uttaranchal, to take a final example, believe that it was in their region that the Kauravas built the famous *lākṣagrha*—the house of lacquer—where they planned to burn the Pāṇḍavas alive (Handa 2001: 307).⁴²

Similar associations can be found in Kullu Valley as well. The Beas river, which originates in the northern part of the valley and drains it as it flows to the south, is named after the famous Vedic seer Vyās, who is the legendary author of the epic, as well as the father of several of its main characters.⁴³ Vipāśa—which is how the river is called in Sanskritic sources—is also explained in the epic. As the story goes, Vasiṣṭh Ṛṣi,⁴⁴ aggrieved at seeing all his sons slain through the doing of his rival sage Viśvāmitr,

⁴¹ Nanda gives a slightly different account of this festival, but the themes expressed are very similar (Nanda 1993: 50).

⁴² In the conclusion of this chapter I will further discuss this phenomenon, which AK Ramanujan calls ‘localization’.

⁴³ Vyās is the biological father of Dhritarāshtr, the blind king and the father of the Kauravas, and of Pāṇḍu, who fathers the Pāṇḍavas. Vyās is also the father of Vidur, the loyal advisor of the Pāṇḍavas.

⁴⁴ Vasiṣṭh, one of the seven Ṛṣis, is usually known for being Rām’s guru in the Rāmāyana. The episode above is recounted in the Ādi Parva of the Mahābhārata (Raya and Ganguli 1883-1896: Ādi Parva, Section CLXXIX).

decided to put an end to his own life. All his attempts, however, proved futile, as he was repeatedly saved in miraculous ways. Finally, Vasiṣṭh reached a gushing Himalayan stream and decided to drown himself in it. He tied himself up strongly with several cords and jumped into the river. To his ill (or good) fortune:

[T]hat stream soon cut those cords and cast the Rishi ashore. And the Rishi rose from the bank, freed from the cords with which he had tied himself. And because his cords were thus broken off by the violence of the current, the Rishi called the stream by the name of Vipāśa (the cord-breaker).⁴⁵

To this very day, Vasiṣṭh Ṛṣi is worshiped in a village bearing the same name—Vasiṣṭh—which is located just across from Haḍimbā's temple, on the opposite bank of the Beas. Interestingly, this story was mentioned already by Cunningham in 1846, who, after examining the geology of the area, argued that the Beas River was formed when the banks of an ancient lake, which must have existed here in the past, were breached. He says that it is plausible that the Sanskrit name of the river, Vipāśa (the bondless), was derived from this fact. The village of Vasiṣṭh is located exactly where Cunningham located the banks of the ancient lake (Cunningham 1848: 209-10). Thus, both etymologies for the river Beas are pegged by locals to figures or stories that anchor them in the *Mahābhārata*. One is even tempted to suggest that an early worship of Vasiṣṭh Ṛṣi in this area, where an ancient lake had been breached and formed a river, may have inspired the composition of this particular episode in the *Mahābhārata*.

Other links to the *Mahābhārata* can be found in other places around here as well. Arjun Cave, for example, is considered the place where Arjun, the third of the Pāṇḍava brothers, fought with Lord Śiva disguised as a hunter:

⁴⁵ Raya and Ganguli (1883-1896: 351, Ādi Parva, Section CLXXIX). Vi-pāśa - "having no noose, unnoosed, untied, freed from fetters" (Monier-Williams, Leumann, and Cappeller 1997: 974).

Lalchand [one of Haḍimbā's priests and a highly knowledgeable and helpful informant]: There was a war between Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. The Pāṇḍavas were honest and the Kauravas were sinners. When they fought each other in the Mahābhārata, they [the Pāṇḍavas] killed them [the Kauravas], even though they were of the same family...So the Pāṇḍavas won, but the Lord (Bhagvān) considered it a sin...So he inflicted them with leprosy [kuṣṭh rog]. Here we consider this the worst of all diseases...Then someone must have told them, go, perform austerities there [in the cave above Shuru village]. So Arjun went there to perform austerities...Then a boar came there. So he [Arjun] killed it...But Śiva Ji came as *bhīl*, a jungle person, a hunter...There were two arrows [stuck in the boar]—one that was shot by Arjun, one by Śiva...Arjun said, this is my hunt, he died of my arrow. The hunter said, he was killed by me! This is *my* boar. Then what happened? He said “forget about it, leave the boar here and let both of us fight each other. The one who will win, the hunt will be his.” But Śiva Ji was very powerful. He pulled many tricks...So then Arjun said “stop, stop. I will not fight you now. First I need to worship my god”...Then he prepared a flower garland and put it on his *devtā* [the Śivaliṅgam he worshiped in the cave]. Meanwhile, the hunter was sitting outside, waiting. Then Arjun, having performed the ritual and having put the flower garland over his god [*liṅgam*], came out and saw the very same garland on the hunter. Then he understood, and asked [Śiva] for forgiveness. Then he [Śiva] said “now go. Below you will find Shuru Mātā. Sharvalī. Pārvatī Mātā [the goddess of Shuru Village].” So then he went down, and he must have worshiped the *Mātā*. And told her “this and that has happened with me. I got sick [with the skin disease].” So she said “there is water down there...Wash your face and mouth with this water, and this [the illness] will be over...” Now [the water] is still there, near the temple. Then the leprosy was over. This is the story of that place.⁴⁶

The memory of the Mahābhārata in Kullu Valley runs very far back and is associated with the origin of culture in the region. According to local tradition, Vidur—the half-brother of the kings Dhritarāshtr and Pāṇḍu, who was the loyal advisor of the Pāṇḍavas—married a local (possibly *rākṣasī*) girl, and fathered two sons: Bhot and Mukhur. The latter had founded the ancient village of Makarsa that gave Kullu valley its name (Makarsa is understood by many to designate the ancient name of the region). The

⁴⁶ Lalchand, Haḍimbā temple, January 12, 2011, note 2. This story is a local version of a widely known episode from the Mahābhārata, where Arjun fights with Śiva disguised as a tribal hunter.

story, recounted in similar ways by both by Harcourt and Singh, probably appeared in the original *Vaṃśāvalī*, copies of which both these scholars possessed.⁴⁷

Of all the epic heroes Bhīm is probably the most popular in the Himalaya, and the stories about him are the most frequently commemorated. Neeru Nanda argues that “wherever mention of the Pāṇḍavas is to be found in Himalayan folklore, it is generally Bhīm who looms on the scene—large, fierce, indomitable [*sic.*]” (Nanda 1993: 47). In Jammu, for example, Bhīm is believed to have changed the course of the Chenab river by placing a huge piece of a mountain in its way (Bali 1993: 31), and in Garhwal, the village of Bhyumdar—literally Bhīm’s cave—is said to be named after the hero (Sax 2002: 44). “The legends about Bhima,” writes Sharma, “are awe-inspiring and laughter-provoking. He could eat mounds of grains, could make wells dry, dig mountains and lift elephants on his finger tips and there was nothing inaccessible and impossible for him” (Sharma 1993: 40).

But of all Bhīm’s adventures, his love affair with the demoness Hiḍimbā is probably the most famous. Leavitt discusses three different manifestations of this episode—in text, performance and ritual—in the mountainous regions of present-day Uttar Pradesh, the seat of the former Central Himalayan kingdoms of Garhwal and Kumaon (Leavitt 1991). Bali reports that the Gaddis of Jammu believe that Haḍimbā was a woman of their own tribe, who, after marrying Bhīm, lived with him in their region (Bali 1993: 31). Rose, to take another example, tells of the commemoration of the story in the cult of Ghurka in the (former) Mahlog State of the Simla hills:

⁴⁷ Harcourt (1871: 112-13). For Sardar Hardyal Singh’s account, which was originally published in Urdu, I used Tobdan’s translation, which appears in the appendix to Tobdan (2000). The episode above is reported in Tobdan (2000: 73-74).

Ghurka, who fought bravely in the Mahābhārata war, was the son of Bhīm (one of the Pāṇḍos) by a Rākshani, named Harimbhā. On his death a temple was built to him in Gharshi, a village on the Ghurka Dhār (hill). Another dhār opposite Ghurka dhār is called Harimbha, after the name of Ghurja's mother and a village of the same name (Rose 1985: Vol. I, 465).

But how does Haḍimbā of Dhungri fit into this scheme? And since when?

Pre-colonial Times

Handa, whose study of Himalayan temple architecture spans many publications, argues that Haḍimbā, like many other deities in the Himalaya, was a demonic spirit who underwent Brahminization:

It was with the popularization of Brahmanism [roughly from around the Gupta period onwards] in this region that all these demonic spirits were admitted into the Puranic traditions. Many of them were given a sympathetic and pacificatory garb and projected as humane in nature, but only when appeased. They were accorded a new collective identity as Devi, but they also continued to be identified with their local traditional cognomen. New legends were woven around them, and many of them found way into the Puranas, lending to these demonic deities an aura of religiosity and spirituality. Temples came to be built for them at their traditional places of abode in the thick of jungles or on the mountain peaks. The wooden temple of Hidimba amidst the thick deodar forest at Dhungri near Manali and of Devi (now called Durga) atop a mountain peak at Sharai-Koti are the examples in this regard (Handa 2001: 70).

Tracing the history of the associations of the Kullu Haḍimbā with superregional goddesses and narratives is quite revealing, though, unfortunately, it does not uncover a definitive trajectory. We could start with Haḍimbā's name, which is itself a source for some uncertainty. Today, everyone in Manali calls the Dhungri goddess "Haḍimbā." This, as I have mentioned above, is also what the bent iron rods located above the entrance to her temple read: HADIMBA.⁴⁸ Older devotees admit that the goddess used to be called "Hirmā," as she is often termed in colonial accounts, but argue that this is

⁴⁸ In roman letters.

simply her “deśī name”—how she is called in the local dialect. The fact that in India at large this Mahābhārata rākṣasī often goes by the name of Hiḍimbā, or Hiḍimbī (and not Haḍimbā), is of little concern to anyone here. Possible affinities with a feminine divinity known as “Būṛhī Mā”—“The Old Lady”—who is quite popular in Bengal, are also never raised, despite the rough similarity in name (Hiḍamā) and the fact that Haḍimbā appears as an old lady in one of the most popular narratives about her.⁴⁹

The wooden inscription engraved on the temple wall just above the right corner of the entrance is also indefinite. It is written in Ṭakārī (or Ṭaṅkārī), an old script derived from the ancient Śāradā. In 1878 it was still undeciphered.⁵⁰ It was probably translated at the beginning of the 20th century since Vogel used it in 1904 to date the construction of the temple (Vogel 1903-4). Despite my efforts, I was not able to locate any trustworthy translation of this inscription. Haḍimbā’s head *pujārī*—Mr. Rohitram Sharma—had a partial translation that mentioned the name of the goddess—“Hirmā”—and the fact that the temple was built by Raja Bahadur Singh. Parts of this translation, as well as its exact source, were not entirely clear. Interestingly, Rohitram’s translation did not in any way associate the goddess with the Mahābhārata demoness. The probability that the inscription indeed fails to mention such associations is quite high, since Vogel also never mentions the epic association explicitly. Vogel, as we will soon see, was particularly keen on establishing a connection between the Dhungri goddess and the Mahābhārata *rākṣasī*, and the fact that he does not refer to an explicit connection made by the inscription most

⁴⁹ On the worship of the Old Lady in Bengal and related processes of her brahmanization, see Chaudhuri (1939).

⁵⁰ For a brief discussion of this inscription see Vogel (1903-4: 264). Harcourt, who knew the temple well, does not mention the inscription at all in his 1871 publication, and Mrs. J. C. Murray Aynsley, who visits the valley in 1878, writes the following after visiting the temple: “On one of the door-posts was a short inscription, which, we were informed, had never been deciphered” (Murray-Aynsley 1879: 282).

probably means that it was not there. It seems safe to assume that if it did, Vogel would have mentioned it to strengthen his claim.

Haḍimbā's temple is quite well known for its fine wooden carving. Other temples in the region, says Tobdan, "are not decorated with carvings as exquisitely as that of Dhungri" (Tobdan 2000: 22).⁵¹ Alongside decorative motifs—such as elephants, lions, leopards, makaras (crocodiles), as well as knots, scrolls and plait-work—one can find here images of Durgā Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, Lakṣmī sitting at Viṣṇu's feet, Rām, Lakṣman and Sītā, Śiva and Pārvatī, Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs*, and the nine planets (Navagrah). Yet none of these carvings bears any memory of the Mahābhārata scene in which Haḍimbā and Bhīm are the main protagonists. There are no Pāṇḍava brothers here, no Kurukṣetra war, nor any other epic event. Such images, we should mention, are not unheard of in this area. The famous temple of Mṛkulā Devī in Lahul is covered with wood carving of episodes from both the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. Interestingly, this Lahuli temple is said to have been built by the same builder who constructed Haḍimbā's temple in Dhungri. According to the legend, King Bahadur Singh, who commenced the construction of the Dhungri temple, having seen its beauty, decided that such a magnificent structure must never be duplicated. He therefore ordered that the right hand of the builder be cut off. The latter, furious at this brutality, resorted to building the Lahuli temple with only one hand—after which he was executed by the raja.⁵² Lalchand

⁵¹ For a discussion of the artistic aspects of Haḍimbā's temple, as well as of other temples in the area, see Chetwode (1968) and Handa (2001). Hirananda Shastri also confirms that the carvings in the Dhungri temple are "perhaps the finest specimens of wood carving in the valley" (Shastri 1907-8: 267).

⁵² Harcourt claims that the second temple was actually built in Chamba at a place called Triloknath (Harcourt 1871: 323), yet Haḍimbā *pūjārīs* and others in Manali insist that it was the Mṛkulā Devī temple. Sharma reports a similar version of this story, and he too argues that it was the Mṛkulā Devī temple in Udaipur, rather than the Triloknāth temple in Chamba, which was built second after the architect lost his hand (Sharma 2007: 146-47). In the Mṛkulā Devī temple itself the story is told the other way around and the priest there argues that it was the Lahuli temple, which boasts carved images of the Mahābhārata and

needed to reflect for a few moments when I asked him why there were no carved images of the Mahābhārata here. He finally said the following:

We Hindus, we have renounced the Mahābhārata. The reason is this: if you tell someone the Rāmāyaṇa, it has an enormously good effect. But with regard to the Mahābhārata—if someone reads this book, or if he recites it to someone else, then it is absolutely certain that it will result in some sort of conflict. This is why it was neglected. No one studied it. The Pāṇḍava brothers, they did not follow God (Bhagvān). They only followed god Kṛṣṇa. And they only followed Haḍimba because Kṛṣṇa gave her a promise that she would become a goddess: Kālī, Durgā, etc. Therefore it [the Mahābhārata] is not carved outside [the temple]. This is what I think. But I haven't asked anyone. This is my thinking (Lalchand, Haḍimbā temple, April 6, 2011, note 4).

The *Vaṃṣāvalī*, as we have already seen above, does not shy away from creating associations with the Mahābhārata. According to it, Mukhur, the founder of ancient Makarsa village, was the son of Vidur, the Pāṇḍavas' loyal advisor. With regard to the association of Haḍimbā with the epic, the text is much less clear. Singh mentions Haḍimbā only once, when he notes that her temple was built by Raja Bahadur Singh (Tobdan 2000: 82). He never mentions the goddess' marriage to Bhīm, her mothering of Ghaṭotkaca, nor any other episodes that might connect her with the Mahābhārata. It seems that his copy of the *Vaṃṣāvalī* did not mention any such associations. Harcourt, on the other hand, mentions Haḍimbā several times, yet on only one occasion does he explicitly associate her with the epic, and this association too has problems (Harcourt 1871: 111-12). It also remains unclear whether Harcourt got this information from his copy of the *Vaṃṣāvalī* or picked it up, as an oral tale, while visiting the valley. I will present and discuss this important section in Harcourt's book soon.

Bhīm, that was actually built first, and that Haḍimbā's temple in Dhungrī was built after the builder had already lost one hand (in fact, the *pujārī* named a third temple as well, which the builder had supposedly built in between the other two) (priest, Mṛkulā Devī temple, Lahul, September 15, 2009, note 1).

The Kulāntapīṭh, to consult another traditional text, does not mention Haḍimbā at all. This, however, could be attributed to the fact that this Sanskrit *māhātmya*, which is very hard to date, gives much credence to Sharbari Mātā (or Sharvali, as I have called her above), the goddess of Shuru village, from whom Haḍimbā is sometimes believed to have stolen her Shakti. The theft, which is ritually commemorated every three years when Haḍimbā visits Sharbari’s temple, may indicate an ancient rivalry that may have existed between the two goddesses at some point in the past. If this was indeed the case, then it is hardly surprising that the author of the *māhātmya*, whom we can assume was a devotee of Sharbari, left Haḍimbā out of this text. I was at some point amazed to realize that Haḍimbā’s theft of Sharbari’s power has taken on additional meaning in recent years. When I visited Sharbari’s temple, a devotee of the goddess complained that while Sharbari is just as powerful and is surely more ancient than Haḍimbā, the latter gets most of the attention these days. This is because Haḍimbā is “on the map,” he complained, by which he meant that Haḍimbā is effectively integrated into the tourist rounds, guidebooks and maps, in a way that Sharbari is not.

Colonial Times

William Moorcroft and George Trebeck, two English travelers who in 1820 explored these areas of the Himalaya on their way to Ladakh and Central Asia, were the first Englishmen to visit the Kullu Valley. In their notes—edited and published by H.H. Wilson in 1841 after the two men had died of fever during their journey—they provide us with some information about the geography, agriculture, and human life in the valley. They do not, however, visit Haḍimbā’s temple in Dhungri or mention the goddess in any way (Moorcroft and Trebeck 1841). Alexander Cunningham, a British army officer and

archaeologist who served as the first director of the Indian Archaeological Survey, visited the valley in 1839 and then again in 1846. He too writes about the geography of the region and mentions a few local legends, but does not mention the goddess Haḍimbā in any way. While it is hard to draw clear conclusions from such silences, it could signal that Haḍimbā's temple was not a 'must-see' site at the time of these explorers' visit.

In 1869, the engineer and traveler John Calvert visited Kullu Valley and provided us with what is probably the first documentation of Haḍimbā's temple. He arrived in Dhungri ["Dungree"] exactly in a time when a bloody buffalo sacrifice to the goddess was taking place. Calvert was horrified and quickly left the place before the buffalo was beheaded. He did manage, however, to draw the scene he had just visited and left us the earliest image of the temple.⁵³ Calvert, as it turns out, was quite clueless about the goddess whose worship he had just witnessed. He describes her as a "Davi or Juggernath, or Devil God" (Calvert 1873: 39), which could nevertheless be of some interest to our concern. It seems probable that Calvert confused the term *devī* (or "Davi" as he calls it)—"goddess"—with the English word "devil." This, however, is not too likely since he does, after all, mention "Davi" and "Devil God" as two separate things. Another, more interesting option is that that "Devil God" is Calvert's translation of the Hindi *rākṣas* or *rākṣasī*, which, as we have seen, means a forest demon or demoness. This, of course, still does not mean that Haḍimbā was presented to him as the Mahābhārata *rākṣasī* who married Bhīm, but it could be an early testimony to her perception as a forest demoness. Unfortunately, this explanation too is problematic since Calvert ascribes the designation

⁵³ See his drawing of the temple on p. 114.

of “Devil Gods” to other deities in the region as well.⁵⁴ Other accounts of Haḍimbā’s temple made by 19th century travelers are also quite thin, and like Calvert their authors do not seem to have good, if any, command of the language and local folklore. J.C. Murrery Aynsley and her husband, for example, left us a brief description of the temple but had nothing of interest to say about the identity of the goddess enshrined in it (Murray-Aynsley 1879: 282).

Another group of writers who produced a lot of valuable information about the region in the 19th century are colonial officials who, in their spare time or as part of their job, studied the area and published their findings in contemporary journals and books. H.A. Rose, for example, was an administrator in the Indian Civil Service who served as Superintendent for the Punjab census in 1901 and Superintendent of Ethnography in that region until 1906. He was also the Assistant Commissioner of Kullu from 1892 to 1894 (1897: 153). In his writing, Rose mentions goddess Hirmā of Dhungri several times and seems to have some knowledge of her. He names four festivals that are held in her honor (Rose: Vol.I, 342), mentions a possible manifestation of her in Lahul (Rose: Vol. III, 14), and says that she is believed to be the sister of Lord Gyephan of Lahul and Jamlu of Malana (Rose: Vol III, 265).⁵⁵ He even quotes a number of obscene songs sung to Hirmā

⁵⁴ What Calvert means by “Juggernaut” is also not entirely clear. On the one hand he uses the term to describe divinities in general. He discusses, for example, the many “Juggernauts” who visit the Daśahrā festival in Kullu (Calvert 1873: 24), and, as we have seen, says the goddess in Dhungri is herself one such “Juggernaut.” Yet it could also be that Calvert is confusing “Juggernaut” with “Raghunāth”—the patron deity of the Kullu valley who is carried in a wheeled chariot during the Daśahrā festival: “That thing you see on wheels on the Maidan [plane] in front of the rest-house, is the car which carries the Kulu Devil or Juggernaut about on these occasions” (Calvert 1873: 29). The fact that this ritual reminds him of the “Jugganath at Puri” (Calvert 1873: 30), by which he must refer to the famous July procession at Puri, surely adds to his (and ours) terminological confusion.

⁵⁵ I will discuss Haḍimba’s relations with Gyephan and Jamlu in chapter three.

during the local Diali festival,⁵⁶ though he refrains from translating all the lines for they are “hardly fit for translation” (Rose 1894a: 2).⁵⁷ Nowhere, however, does Rose associate Hirmā with the epic story of the Mahābhārata or mention any relationships she had with Haḍimb, Bhīm or Ghaṭotkaca. Interestingly, even when Rose does mention the worship of one “Harimbha” in the Simla hills, whom he associates with both Haḍimb and Ghaṭotkaca, he does not suggest that that she is in any way related to the Dhungri Hirmā.

Another important person who wrote about Haḍimbā is Captain Alfred Banon, a British officer who settled in Kullu and married a local girl. His descendants still live in the valley and the family is among the wealthiest and well respected in the region. Banon’s estate is located only a few minute walk from Haḍimbā’s temple and, according to a letter he wrote in 1895 to the editor of *Borderland*, it seems that he had fairly good relations with the goddess:

The local goddess of Manali, Irna Deir [Hirmā Devī, Haḍimbā],⁵⁸ has taken a fancy to me, and taken up her abode in a tree close to my house. She can always be interrogated through one of her mediums—they call them Guro here. But first a kid or lamb must be sacrificed to her. The replies are sometimes wonderfully accurate; and she does not lie quite so much as the other local gods and goddesses (Banon 1896: 238).

Between 1886 and 1887 Banon published a series of four short articles in *The Theosophist* titled “Himalayan Folk Lore”. He recounted numerous tales, myths, and legends from all across the Kullu Valley, as well as from other parts of the Himalaya.

With regard to Haḍimbā, however, he only wrote the following:

⁵⁶ Whereas locals sometime say that the Diali festival is the local version of the pan-Indian Divali festival, the two are significantly dissimilar and celebrated at different times.

⁵⁷ The festival is still celebrated today and indeed accompanied with songs that express sexual themes and obscenities.

⁵⁸ This is probably a typographical error in the original publication. In other places Banon refers to Haḍimbā as “Irma Devi,” which is almost identical with her local name “Hirmā Devī.”

Close to my abode is the celebrated temple of Doongree, a charming green spot, studded with magnificent deodar trees, veritable old forest monarchy and a very pretty mala (fair) is held here every year in May. The divinity is a goddess, by name Irma Devi; she delights in the blood of goats and buffaloes, and is the chief deity in Kooloo, and is the patron saint of Raja Heera Sing of Kooloo and Shangri. At the Dasehra festival at Sultanpur [Kullu town], in the beginning of October, there is a mela or fair, for the whole of Kooloo, and all the principal deities are brought here on the occasion, to the number of two or three hundred. Irma Devi only attends this fair and no other; but occasionally she goes to the hot springs at Bisisht [Vashisht] for a tub: this year she killed her priest, as it is believed she caught him tripping (Banon 1886: 133).⁵⁹

As we can see, Banon too does not associate Hirmā of Dhungri with the Mahābhārata rākṣasī Hiḍimbā. One could suggest that Banon was unaware of the Mahābhārata story and of the Pāṇḍavas' journeys in the Himalayas. However, as his other writings indicate, this is not the case. Here is what he says in this regard:

Kooloo, in common with most other parts of Northern India, appears to have been visited by the Pandavas.... [T]he elevated plateau, which is some thousands of feet above my cottage, overhanging it to the east, itself some 7,000 feet above sea level, is called Pandavaka Roopa (rice field). Perhaps the climate has changed since then, for ice field would be a more appropriate name (Banon 1886: 137).

Banon then goes on to tell a wonderful little tale about how, upon arriving in Manali, the Pāṇḍavas' mother Kuntī was filled with amorous feelings and announced to her sons that she wanted to remarry. The horrified sons needed to flee the valley so that their mother, who was quite old at the time, would not carry out what they deemed was an inappropriate plan. Even when Banon recounts such an explicit story about the Pāṇḍavas, he does not mention any association between them and the goddess who is enshrined so close to his house, and with whom he was, as we have seen, quite familiar.

⁵⁹ Banon probably means that Haḍimbā's priest committed some kind of sin (pāp) or improper behavior. Allegations such as these—leveled against priests, mediums and administrators of different goddesses and gods—can still be encountered in contemporary Kullu Valley from time to time.

The first text to suggest an explicit association between Haḍimbā and Bhīm is Harcourt's *The Himalayan Districts of Kooloo, Lahoul, and Spiti*, published in 1871. Harcourt, who was the Assistant Commissioner in Kullu from 1867 to 1870, writes the following about the goddess:

A chief or, as the people call him, a demon, by the name Tandee, fixed his abode on the Kooloo side of the Rohtung pass, and with him lived his sister Hurimba, whose temple is now at Doongree, near Menalee, in the Upper Beas Valley. Bhaem Sen, the Pandu, next appears on the scene, his mission being to clear Kooloo of all the demons in it; but in this instance he contented himself with running off with Hurimba, and Tandee, aggrieved at this, fought with Bhaem Sen, and was in the conflict slain. With Bhaem Sen was a follower, one Bidher [Vidur], who however was not a Pandu, and this man married a daughter of Tandee's. Two sons were the fruit of this union, one called Bhot, and the other Mukhur, both these boys being brought up by the goddess Beas Ricki (Harcourt 1871: 111-12).⁶⁰

Harcourt's account raises several important questions. The first concerns the source of this story, which is mentioned neither by Banon nor Rose, nor by any of the other early writers that I discussed above. One option is that Harcourt read this tale in his copy of the *Vaṃṣāvalī*, though it would then remain unclear why Singh, who also had a copy of the text, mentions only the second half of the story. Singh tells us about Vidur and his two sons but reports nothing about Haḍimbā and Tandi. A second option is that Harcourt, who had spent time on the ground in the Kullu Valley and left us quite a lot of information about the geography, agriculture, and life in the valley, picked up this story as an oral narrative. This possibility, however, also has problems, since such a narrative is completely absent from living memory in the contemporary Kullu Valley. Not even one person I questioned about this story had ever heard of a demon named Tandi. "Do you mean Tandi in Lahul?" villagers would usually reply, referring to a certain place in Lahul

⁶⁰ "Beas Ricki," of course, is not a goddess but the famous Vyās Ṛṣi. Harcourt probably mistook "Ricki" to indicate a feminine subject.

Valley that bears the same name. Others would guess that I must be talking about the famous Tundiya Rākṣ, who lives under the Manu temple in old Manali village and who was subdued by the Ṛṣi long ago. This story is fairly well known in Manali village and, in fact, it was reported already in 1894 by Rose, who tells us of one “Tundi Rakshasa” who lived in Manali, married a local girl named Timar Shāchkā, and was eventually subdued by Manu Ṛṣi. Nowhere in his report does Rose associate this demon Tundi with goddess Hirmā (Rose 1894b: 18). The origin of Harcourt’s story, so it seems, will remain unclear.⁶¹

⁶¹ The subjugation of Tundiya Rākṣ by Manu is commemorated in an annual festival that is still celebrated in Old Manali. According to the story, having subdued Tudiya, Manu put an end to the human sacrifice that the Rākṣ used to demand, but promised him a substitute instead—the smell of humans’ burned hair. Thus, during the festival, villagers secretly sneak up on one another in an attempt (often successful) to set each other’s hair on fire. The role played here by Manu, in subduing a demon who may once have been perceived as Haḍimbā’s brother, tempts one to equate him with Bhīm. While this could also be supported by the intimate ritual connections existing today between Manu and Haḍimbā, such an association has no trace in local memory and would surely be immediately rejected by all devotees.



Figure 7: Haḍmbā Temple. Original title: “Minali Temple Kulu. Doongree Temple Menalee. 1870.” Water-color drawing by Captain Alfred Frederick Pollock Harcourt, 1870.⁶²

⁶² British Library, Online Gallery.

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/other/019wdz000002568u00000000.html> , accessed on December 10, 2011.

Another question that arises from Harcourt's account is why he refrained from establishing an explicit connection between "Hurimbha" and the Mahābhārata rākṣasī Hiḍimbā. The two stories resemble each other so much that one is almost compelled to draw the conclusion that the two characters are, in fact, one and the same. Yet Harcourt remains silent. He does not anywhere suggest that Hurimbha is, indeed, the epic rākṣasī Hiḍimbā. It could be, of course, that Harcourt was not aware of this epic episode and hence did not recognize the similarity. Yet it could also be that Harcourt noticed the many discrepancies between the two narratives, which raised his doubts that these were indeed two versions of the same tale. First, Haḍimbā's brother is here named Tandi and not Hiḍimb, as in the Mahābhārata. Second, in Harcourt's story Tandi has a daughter who is not mentioned in other tellings of the epic. Third, Ghaṭotkaca, Haḍimbā's and Bhīm's giant warrior son, who plays a crucial role in later stages of the epic, is completely missing from this narrative. What is important for us is that Harcourt's failure to identify the local "Hurimba" with Hiḍimbā of the Mahābhārata indicates that his source for this story, whether the *Vaṃśāvalī* or some other local tale, also refrained from making such an explicit connection. Otherwise, one would assume, Harcourt would have mentioned it in his account.⁶³

The first time an explicit association between Haḍimbā and the epic is made in a published work took place more than three decades later. In a publication from 1904, Vogel writes that "the famous temple in Ḍhungrī near Manālī...is dedicated to Hirmā

⁶³ It should be noted that in 1911 another traveler to the region, M.C. Forbes, reports the story of Haḍimbā ("Hurmiba") and Tandi. It is highly likely, however, that he had learned about this story from Harcourt's book, since he mentions the latter's account of the temple just after telling the story and uses very similar wording (Forbes 1911: 81). The 1897 Gazetteer of the Kangra District (Kullu, Lahul, Spiti), written by A. H. Diack, who was the Settlement Officer of Kullu from 1887 to 1891, also does not mention this episode or associate Haḍimbā with the Mahābhārata in any way (Diack 1897).

Devī, the patron goddess of Kullū, in whom students of Sanskrit literature will recognize the *rākṣasī* Hiḍimbā, the spouse of Bhīmasena the Pāṇḍava” (Vogel 1903-4: 264). Though still failing to mention the Mahābhārata by name, Vogel must be referring to it when he speaks of “Hiḍimbā,” who, as he notes, should be familiar to “students of Sanskrit literature.” Writing only four years later, in an article that quotes Vogel’s publication, Shastri removes all remaining doubt: “Hirmā, the man-eating rākshasī Hiḍimbā of the Mahābhārata, is here worshipped as a goddess” (Shastri 1907-8: 272). Vogel and Hutchison are also clearer in their famous 1933 publication, where after quoting at length Harcourt’s story about Haḍimbā and Tandi, they add the following conclusion:

[T]he above [Harcourt’s story of Hurimba and Tandee] is the form in which the legend has come down from early times in Kulu. In reality it is a garbled version of a very ancient legend or myth regarding Bhima the second of the five Pandava brothers, found in Mahabharata (first canto, chapters 152-156). There Hidimba is a rakshasi, or man-eating demoness, in whom we recognize the goddess, Hirma or Hirimba of the Kulu Valley. Her brother, called Hidimba in the Epic and Tandi in the Kulu legend, was killed by Bhimasena (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 426-27).

In the years that followed Hutchison’s and Vogel’s 1933 publication, Haḍimbā’s identification as the Mahābhārata *rākṣasī* is complete. While writers do mention other aspects of her identity, and sometimes reflect on her historical development, it is no longer possible to ignore her epic association. Thus, for example, in 1968, Penelope Chatwode says the following about Haḍimbā:

The Ḍhungrī temple is dedicated to the sinister blood-loving Goddess Hirmā Devī, the Hiḍimbā of the Mahābhārata, a female demon who was lucky enough to make an excellent marriage, far above her station, to no less a person than Bhīma the Pāṇḍava. (Chatwode 1968: 940)

In the same year, P.H. Pott tries to show that the alliance between Kullu and Chamba in the 16th century, enacted through the marriage of the princess Kullu with the prince heir of Chamba, was modeled after the epic marriage of Haḍimbā and Bhīm, which, in turn, promoted the veneration of the goddess Haḍimbā. While Pott's argument is quite thin and hardly convincing, it does prove that by the time he writes, the association of Haḍimbā as the epic character is so well established that its prominence in the 16th century is taken for granted. In 2006, Luchesi repeats the same observations: "It is also said that Haḍimbā is identical with the demoness Haḍimbā who in the Mahābhārata epic is described as the temporal consort of the Paṇḍava hero Bhīma and mother of Ghaṭotkaca" (Luchesi 2006: 69). While these and other writers often mention other aspects of Haḍimbā's identity as well, this epic "face" is usually foregrounded and emphasized.

My intention here is not to argue that the British "invented" the goddess of Dhungri as Haḍimbā of the Mahābhārata. In fact, it is almost impossible to determine definitely the time in which Haḍimbā became identified with the Mahābhārata *rākṣasī* Hiḍimbā. Whereas written reports seem to indicate that the association emerged only during the 19th century, with Harcourt's account of the goddess' relationships with Tandi and Bhīm, other traditions in the Kullu Valley and in the Himalaya more broadly suggest that the region has been connected with the events and characters of the epic from long ago. It is quite clear, however, that the epic aspect of Haḍimbā's identity has moved to the fore and gained much significance in recent decades. It is presently the most popular of all the identities she sports. In the rest of this chapter I will examine the reasons that might have led to this state of affairs.

In *Orientalism and Religion*, Richard King reminds us that the emphasis the Protestant Reformation places on the importance of scripture in understanding the true nature of Christianity resulted in a general ‘text-oriented’ approach to knowledge in the modern West and in a textual bias when conceptualizing other religions. King argues that in colonized India this bias led to privileging Brahmanic views expressed in Sanskrit texts and to viewing these texts as the main location of Indian religiosity. Texts, which were understood to embody the foundational essence of Hinduism, were preferred to other forms of religious expressions, such as oral traditions, iconography, and performance. Ultimately, this resulted in the furnishing of a new holistic and unified conception of Hinduism, which, in reality, was a much more diverse, dynamic, and multilayered phenomenon (if not phenomena) (King 1999: 62-81, 96-117). The privileging of texts also enabled the imposition of order on a rather complex and “messy” reality. Comparing two models for presenting Hinduism that developed towards the end of the 19th century—the textual model of Monier Monier-Williams and the ethnographic model of William Crooke—I elsewhere showed how the first model, which put forward a coherent, intelligible, and well-structured history of Hinduism, was eventually preferred to the typological, yet quite anecdotal and confusing, presentation of living Hinduism offered by the second.⁶⁴

I suggest that the colonial preference for textual expressions of religion, which enabled imposition of order on the complex religious realities encountered by the British on the ground, also worked in the shaping the image of Haḍimbā. As will become clearer in the following chapters, Haḍimbā sports multiple personalities that do not necessarily

⁶⁴ Halperin, “Text vs. Life: The Competing Hinduisms of Monier Monier-Williams and William Crooke.” Submitted to the *International Journal of Hindu Studies* for review.

cohere or cannot be brought together in one comprehensive narrative. This, of course, creates difficulties for anyone who wishes either to “understand” the goddess or present her to others who are unfamiliar with her. The availability of a “ready-made” popular narrative in which the goddess could instantly find a proper predefined place makes this task significantly easier. Various aspects of the goddess’ multilayered identity, put forward through diverse forms of religious expression—oral narratives, ritual performance, iconography, material paraphernalia, possession, etc.—can thus be either ignored or pushed to the background, while one simple and familiar aspect is privileged and foregrounded. It is no wonder, then, that Vogel and Hutchison, when discussing Haḍimbā, immediately refer their readers to the relevant episode in the epic—“first canto, chapters 152-156” (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 426). Not only does it make the goddess familiar, but it also provides a way for introducing her in a succinct way.⁶⁵

Mark Elmore and ‘States of Religion’

In order to better understand the later developments of the goddess Haḍimbā in post-colonial times, I turn now to Mark Elmore’s argument as put forward in his excellent dissertation *States of Religion: Postcolonialism, Power, and the Formation of Himachal Pradesh* (2005). Elmore examines the “cultural consolidation of the Western Himalayas through the creation of new institutions, practices, and fields of knowledge” (Elmore 2005: 4) and argues that not only was “religion” instrumental to the constitution of “the state” but both these concepts and corresponding institutions were mutually constructed throughout the process. I present Elmore’s argument in considerable length

⁶⁵ Vogel and Hutchison do not mention the exact version of the Mahābhārata they refer to. It could be the Ganguli version, published between 1883-96, though there the story of Hiḍimbā appears in sections 154-8 and not 152-6.

since his work, though not without its problems, is of great significance to my own research. Elmore seeks to lay out a comprehensive framework for the understanding of religion in contemporary Himachal Pradesh and has interesting observations to make regarding the goddess Haḍimbā as well. I hope that my critical engagement with his ideas proves useful in promoting our understanding not only of Haḍimbā, but also of religion in the contemporary Himalaya more generally.

In 1947, writes Elmore, when India achieved Independence,

the Western Himalayas were politically, theologically, and linguistically divided into more than thirty independent areas. The next two decades witnessed a powerful effort to unify the region and erode local control culminating politically in the grant of full statehood in 1971 (Elmore 2005: xiii).

The ground for the consolidation of the region was laid already by the British. The latter (1) constructed “Shimla as an urban center within which the state would be forged,” (2) promoted “religious reforms in which the state established itself as the arbiter of cultural and religious values,” and (3) created a discourse about the local ‘Paharee’ person that “was formative in defining the regional identity of the Himachali community” (Elmore 2005: 143).

After independence, Y.S. Parmar—“the architect of Modern Himachal and its first Chief Minister” (Elmore 2005: 61)—and other local leaders were making the case for an independent state of Himachal Pradesh. Inheriting the British discourse about the Paharee person, they argued that the hill-people were inherently united by their shared languages, religion, and cultural values. The region’s religious unity was, in their eyes, a clear sign of the region’s autonomy, and it soon became the basis for its political claim for statehood. Elmore stresses that “the discourse on religion that emerged in and through the process of state recognition was integral to the perception that these historically divided

regions were united” (Elmore 2005: 190). Once the state was created, Palmar began pursuing its rapid modernization. His plans included the building of roads, advance of agriculture, development of hydroelectricity and, most importantly, expansion of tourism:

The post-independence leaders of the Western Himalayas were acutely aware of the region’s tourism potential. For three successive empires (Mughals, Sikhs and the British) the Western Himalayas served as a site of pleasure, escape and relaxation. Colonial officials and Indian travelers extolled its virtues in popular print journals and other media. Moreover...the relative heights of the Himalayas and their distance from the chaos of the plains have continued to be as desired as it was (*sic.*) for the colonial administrators (Elmore 2005: 367).

HP’s Department of Tourism and its corporate double, the Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (HPTDC), began to market an image of the state that would make it attractive for tourists. Pamphlets promoted the region’s natural beauty, therapeutic qualities and overall peacefulness, and portrayed Himachal as a pristine land, pure and untouched by time or modern disturbances. Here too religion played a key role. One of Himachal’s most appealing features was presented as the unique relationships that exist here between land, people, and gods. The great number of ancient temples, the popular fairs and festivals, and the timeless rites all served as evidence for HP’s special covenant with the divine and helped forging the image of the state as The Land of the Gods. Interestingly, Elmore notes, this image was projected not only to outsiders, but to insiders as well, and was quickly internalized by Himachalis themselves.

The same religion, however, which was instrumental in consolidating Himachali unity and constructing a marketable image of the state, also posed, and still poses, several significant difficulties:

[I]n the pre-colonial and colonial period often the largest land owner in a village was the devatā. Even in places where the devatā was not the legal owner of the largest plot of land, as when Rajas sometimes held more land, the devatā often

served as the grain repository and the mechanism for the redistribution of wealth (Elmore 2005: 210).

This, of course, gave great power to local deities and their caretakers. It also meant that the dominant forms of sociopolitical and economic organization in the region were local rather than translocal and thus hindered mass-scale regional transformations. Therefore, in order to clear the way for real progress in HP, argues Elmore, religion needed to be banished from the political and economic spheres, so that the state could step in and effectively carry out its development plans. This task was eventually achieved through a series of land reforms executed from the early 1950s through 1972, which, among other things, “sought to return land to the tiller of the soil, to eliminate intermediaries between the state and farmers and to limit the size of land holdings of a single individual.” (Elmore 2005: 210). In the Abolition Act of 1953, deities were defined as “minors” and were deprived of their right to hold personal property. The “control of the lands was thus shifted to the administrators of temples who often did not have the foresight or political connections to maintain control of the devatā’s lands. This in turn radically undercut the material relations between temples and villagers” (Elmore 2005: 210) and transformed the structural basis for the whole economy in the region. Following these acts, not only was religion relegated to the non-political and non-economic realm of “culture,” but its expulsion from the political and economic spheres enabled the state to step in and take on these functions. This, writes Elmore, resulted in “the creation of division between religion and state, where the state was the agency taking care of the population, where deities became minors in need of protection and temples were divested of their resources, allowing them to appear autonomous” (Elmore 2005: 212).

A second problem emerged from the other characteristics of local religion, namely possession and animal sacrifice. These practices, perceived as backward, superstitious and primitive, undermined the projected image of a peaceful, pristine and pure Himachali religion, came in conflict with the rational logic associated with modernity, and hindered the progress of modernization. The violent acts of blood sacrifice created particular difficulties with regard to tourism, since they undermined both the image of a peaceful mountain religion and the religious values of the visiting tourists. The state, therefore, through the Department of Tourism and the HPTDC, has tried to minimize, if not to abolish, such practices.

These complex relationships between religion and the state in Himachal Pradesh lead Elmore to one of the main conclusions of his dissertation, namely,

that the postcolonial formation of Himachal Pradesh is marked by a deep contradiction: its formation depended on religion as a pillar of unity, while the economic modernization needed for ‘sufficient development’ assumed the progressive erasure of religion. This tension between the needs of social cohesion and the demands of modernization inexorably shaped how relations between religion and state were formed (Elmore 2005: 147).

Especially relevant to my own concerns here is Elmore’s discussion of the goddess Haḍimbā, who, he argues, is a fine example for how the state, operating through the Department of Tourism and the HPTDC, is modifying local religion so that it fits the desired model. He examines how, by restricting the so-called backward, superstitious, and violent aspects of the worship of Haḍimbā, she has been refashioned to better suit touristic tastes. In what follows, I will present Elmore’s discussion of Haḍimbā in relative detail and examine his arguments carefully. It is my goal to show that when examined closely and from a point of view that is immersed in the realities “on the ground,” it turns out that things are much more complex than Elmore perceives them to be. This, I hope,

will enable us to deepen our understanding of the dynamics surrounding Haḍimbā as well as provide additional insight to the workings of religion in larger HP.

As I noted above, Elmore lays out an encompassing and very helpful theoretical framework for understanding the complex sociopolitical, religious and cultural realities in contemporary HP. At the same time, his observations are not without difficulties. For example, while it is indeed quite clear that prior to the arrival of the British and, later, the enactment of the Constitution of India, the West Himalayan region was politically divided into small kingdoms and chiefdoms. Chetan Singh shows that the distinct Himalayan localities did share several cultural traits, such as the village deity system and regional Brahmanization processes. This indicates that some kind of unity did exist here before the arrival of the British (Singh 2006a). Especially confusing in this regard is what exactly Elmore means when he argues that the region was “theologically” divided (Elmore 2005: xxx). If we examine contemporary practices, folklore, and temple architecture, it becomes clear that many aspects of religious life were shared in the area prior to the arrival of the British. In any case, and as pointed by Pollock in his introduction to *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia* (Pollock 2011), scholars should better understand pre-colonial realities before asserting sweeping colonial transformations. The pre-colonial conditions existing in HP are hardly mentioned in Elmore’s discussion.

Another issue is Elmore’s claim that religion has to a large extent been banished from the economic and political spheres of life in the state. As Berti shows, deities in Kullu Valley remain important political players and keep exercising their power in

various political arenas (Berti 2006).⁶⁶ Finally, and as I will discuss at greater length in the following pages, I believe that the place granted by Elmore to written texts—colonial books, local writers’ publications, tourist pamphlets, etc.—and the role he ascribes to them in reshaping life in the region are somewhat inflated. Reality on the ground, while not unaffected by government publications and scholarly volumes, has a dynamic of its own. It seems to me that when it comes to their gods, people in Himachal enjoy greater independence and more room for maneuvering and creativity than what Elmore’s account seems to allow.

As I mentioned above, the goddess Haḍimbā is one of the main examples that serve to illustrate Elmore’s claims. He begins by arguing that in equating Harcourt’s Hurimba with the Mahābhārata Hiḍimbā in their 1933 publication, Hutchison and Vogel “make a leap that would forever change the character of the area” (Elmore 2005: 421). “[T]he association between the Dhungrī goddess and the Mahābhārata,” he explains, “does not appear to be one that villagers were making before the assertion by Hutchison and Vogel” (Elmore 2005: 422). I am grateful to Elmore for this observation, which turned my own attention to Vogel’s and Hutchison’s important intervention. His claim sparked my own journey into the colonial sources mentioned above in search of Haḍimbā’s past. However, Elmore’s conclusions do have their problems. There are minor difficulties, such as the fact that he misses Vogel’s and Shastri’s earlier publications, which established the association between Haḍimbā and the Mahābhārata thirty years prior to the 1933 publication, and that he fails to mention many of the relevant colonial writers noted above, such as Calvert, Benon, and Diack. More importantly, Elmore

⁶⁶ A fascinating case is that of local deities’ resistance to the building of an ecologically-harmful ski village in the region, which I hope to examine in a future publication. This story was also reported in *The New York Times* (Bajaj 2012).

ignores the broad Mahābhārata associations existing in the Kullu region which could indicate that the strong epic connections of Haḍimbā may have predated the arrival of the British and were simply missed by them in their reports. Elmore himself seems to sense this difficulty, and as he progresses in his argument he softens his earlier statement:

I am not arguing against a connection [between] the story of the Mahābhārata and the local goddess at Dhungri. There is indeed substantial evidence to suggest such an association. However, what I do want to suggest is that this connection is not timeless and unchanging. Rather, it appears the connection has been reinvented by the writings of Hutchison and Vogel (Elmore 2005: 424)

It is my sense, however, that Elmore—who nowhere actually presents the “substantial evidence” that suggests Haḍimbā’s epic associations—is much more convinced than I am that her present image is indeed rooted in this colonial intervention.

In addition to the role played by the Department of Tourism and the HPTDC in disseminating ideas about religion in HP, Elmore points to a group of “vernacular ethnohistorians” as key contributors to this process. A dispersed group of independent writers, film-makers, and photographers, these individuals have participated intensively in the production and dissemination of knowledge on various aspects of culture in HP and thus also played a pivotal role in the consolidation of local ideas about Himachali religion, unity, and personhood discussed above. Their influence, Elmore argues, is deep and wide. Referring, for example, to a subgroup of such ethnohistorians, who publish their material in local journals, Elmore explains that:

the majority of the people are local doctors, teachers and farmers who are interested in the preservation and reproduction of local culture. These people not only participate in the disembodied forms of linguistic production but also live in communities and influence the daily workings of rites and temples through their actions. Just as media connect people across times and spaces, so too do these people serve as mediums in the production and consumption of knowledge at specific places. They mediate the local and the translocal (Elmore 2005: 344).

The association of Haḍimbā with the epic, Elmore argues, which was firmly established by Hutchison and Vogel,

has been picked up by vernacular ethnohistorians and the Department of Tourism and deployed at the site itself [Haḍimbā's temple]. This rethinking has had a number of important consequences both in the way the shrine is imagined and in its actual practices (Elmore 2005: 424).

Elmore is correct in arguing that many ethnohistorians associate Haḍimbā, the goddess resident in Manali, with the epic figure Hidimba. Thus, for example, Man Mohan Sharma, who had “the good fortune of being officially posted in Uttarakhand” during 1970-3, and who set out “to provide a comprehensive guide to the traveler and relate the fascinating myths and legends” of that area, tells us at some point of “Hurimba,” whose temple stands in “Dunagiri” forest in “Kulu.” Hurimba, Sharma says, was the sister of a demon king named “Tandec.” She eloped with Bhīm, with whom she later had a son named Ghaṭotkaca (Sharma 1978: 21). In 1996, Sudarshan Vashishtha published a Hindi volume in which he provides elaborate information on dozens of deities in the Kullu Valley, including administrative data and photos of the deities' palanquins. He opens his description of the Dhungri goddess by stating that “goddess Hirmā is believed to be Haḍimbā, the wife of Bhīm who used to be a *rākṣasī*. On meeting Bhimsen, the medial Pāṇḍava, she attained divinity” (Vashishtha 1996: 128, my translation).⁶⁷ M.R. Thakur, whom Elmore presents as “a man who has arguably done more than anyone to define the shape of this discourse [the discourse promoted by vernacular ethnohistorians]” (Elmore 2005: 306), writes the following regarding Haḍimbā in his widely read *Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Himachal Pradesh*:

⁶⁷ Vashishtha means that Bhīm is the “medial” between the first three Pandava brothers (Yudhiṣṭhir and Arjun), since there are actually five (the twins Nakul and Sahadev being the other two).

Before her marriage to Bhim the Pandav brother of the Mahabharata, she was a Rakshasi and her brother Hadimb used to bring her human being[s] for her food. Bhim killed Hadimb and married Hadimba and they had a son Ghatotkach, a great warrior who fought on the side of Pandavas in the great war. She, subsequently, became a goddess and she has a pagoda type temple at Dhungri near Manali (Thakur 1997: 61).

It is hard to determine beyond doubt whether these and other ethnohistorians who write about Haḍimbā picked up her description from Hutchison and Vogel or encountered it on the ground as oral traditions. I agree with Elmore, however, that the former option is the more plausible. Sharma's presentation of Haḍimbā, for example, is so close to that of Harcourt that the fact that he does not cite the latter as his source creates a bit of discomfort.

A much greater difficulty in Elmore's argument lies elsewhere. It emerges from the second part of his argument:

This rethinking has had a number of important consequences both in the way the shrine is imagined and in its actual practices....On the one hand, the association with the text [The Mahābhārata] authorizes a translocal connection. On the other hand, that association is highly compromised by the content of the text in which Haḍimbā is a demon and not a goddess. Thus, the Tourism Department deploys the site as an important pilgrimage site of the Great Goddess [Durgā]....In an effort to purge the site of all of its 'demonic' associations, the Department of Tourism, the temple committee and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) have placed tight regulations on the religious practices of the site....Foremost here is the complete absence of animal sacrifice at or near the temple and the ascendancy of darśan as the mode of ritual interaction. While Haḍimbā has historically been a goddess who was propitiated with blood and who satisfied desires and demands in relation to sacrifices given, these practices have now stopped (Elmore 2005: 424-27).

What Elmore suggests here is that while Haḍimbā's epic associations do carry some benefits since they establish "translocal connections," they are mostly harmful for the site since they imply that Haḍimbā is not a goddess but a demon. He argues that in order to

hide Haḍimbā's demonic origin and highlight her divine nature, the associations with the Mahābhārata are downplayed while her identification with the great goddess and Durgā are brought to the fore. Concomitantly, practices connected with Haḍimbā's demonic nature, namely, animal sacrifices, are forbidden and have now stopped.

Although Elmore's suggestion sounds convincing and seems to make much sense, the realities on the ground clearly prove it wrong. Most conspicuous is animal sacrifice, which, as I have witnessed throughout my years in the field, is not only widely practiced but also seems to have become more frequent (see Chapter 2). In the two and a half years I spent in Kullu, I witnessed numerous sacrifices of sheep, goats and chicken, and even two, fairly elaborate and quite bloody buffalo sacrifices. As attested by the blood stains on Haḍimbā's temple wall, where devotees smear the blood of sacrificed chicken and pour whiskey as a present for the goddess, the bloody act is done here almost daily. Goats and sheep are also sacrificed on many occasions, often by individuals who wish to thank the goddess for the good fortune she has bestowed on them. Whereas the goats and sheep are sometimes sacrificed after dark, when not too many tourists are present at the site, on many other occasions the killing takes place in broad daylight and in front of the visiting crowds. Chickens are sacrificed almost daily, and with no (real) attempt to hide the act from sight.

The translocal epic associations of Haḍimbā are also much more important than Elmore makes them seem. There are many examples indicating that Haḍimbā is advertised much more for her epic connections than for the fact that she is considered an incarnation of the Great Goddess Durgā. Her demonic origin is also stressed in many publications. Thus, for example, the HPTDC's small booklet *Kullu-Manali Circuit*, which is one in a series of booklets on tourist circuits in Himachal, states the following

on the temple in Dhungri: “Dedicated to Hadimba Devi, a pagan goddess who was the wife of Bhima in the Mahabharata tale, is the presiding deity of Kullu raja’s.”⁶⁸ While “pagan” does not mean “demonic,” it does seem to at least hint at that sort of origin. Durgā is not mentioned in this short paragraph even once. Another booklet, *Nest & Wings’ Guide to Kullu - Manali*, sold with an attached map of Himachal Pradesh, has been widely available for purchase in Manali for many years. The 25th edition, published in 2003, says the following on the location of Haḍimbā’s temple: “At this very place, aeons ago, Bhim killed the strong and wittfully [sic.] cruel demon, Hadimb and married his sister Hadimba, shortly after. Hadimba expurgated her sins by performing a great ‘tapa’ and consequently began to be worshipped as a goddess” (Agarwala 2003: 25). While the publisher is himself from Delhi, the HPTDC and the Tourist Information Center at Kullu are acknowledged in the booklet for their involvement in the production of this popular publication. Here too, nothing is said about Haḍimbā being Durgā or the great goddess.

Travel books for these areas foreground similar associations. Minakshi Chaudhry’s *Destination Himachal*, published in 2007, is a high-end chromo-publication and a fairly good and detailed travel guide to Himachal. The author not only highlights Haḍimbā’s marriage to Bhīm, but also celebrates her love for (even human) blood: “The Mahabharata records that Bhim Sen, one of the Pandava brothers, married Hidimba, the presiding deity of Kulanthpitha [Kullu], after slaying her brother Hidimb. Hidimba has been worshipped since ancient times and offerings to her included human sacrifice.” (Chaudhry 2007: 186). Even the famous Lonely Planet finds the epic associations much

⁶⁸ Himachal-Tourism (32). The publication year of this booklet is unspecified but this is an impressively colorful small book, on chromo pages, that seems fairly recent.

more alluring than any others: “Pilgrims come here from across India to honour Hadimba, the wife of Bhima from the Mahabharata...Ghatotkach, the son of Hadimba and Bhima, is worshipped in the form of a sacred tree near the temple” (Singh 2007: 308).

Internet publications follow the same logic. HP’s Department of Tourism website highlights Haḍimbā’s epic origin: “Manali has many attractions but the chief centre of interest, historically and archeologically, is undoubtedly the DHOONGRI TEMPLE dedicated to goddess Hidimba, the [wife of] Bhim of Mahabharat fame.”⁶⁹ Yatra.com, “a leading online travel services provider in India, US and UK,” says that the temple is “dedicated to Hadimba Devi (a female demon) who, according to the epic Mahabharat, was the sister of Hadimb rakshash (demon) who ruled some of the sub-mountainous tracts of the Himalayas.”⁷⁰ Himachaltouristguide.com, which speaks of “goddess Hadimba” more than ten times in three paragraphs, nevertheless stresses that she “was the sister of the ‘Rakshash’ Hadimb who ruled the mountains and was feared by all.”⁷¹ Haḍimbā’s marriage to Bhīm is a recurring theme in this website’s presentation, while the goddess’ identity as Durgā is mentioned only once. Many other online sites, which often simply cut-and-paste each other’s descriptions, rarely fail to highlight Haḍimbā’s epic associations, mostly her marriage to Bhīm, but often her *rākṣasī* background and love for blood as well.

⁶⁹ <http://himachaltourism.gov.in/post/Hadimba-temple.aspx> , accessed on May 2, 2012.

⁷⁰ <http://www.yatra.com/holiday-packages/destinations/in/manali/attractions/Hadimba+temple> , accessed on May 2, 2012.

⁷¹ <http://www.himachaltouristguide.com/kullu/manali/manali-pilgrimage/275-Hadimba-devi-temple> , accessed on May 2, 2012.

Haḍimbā's demonic Mahābhārata associations are highlighted not only in paper and digital publications. As we have already seen at the beginning of this chapter, Haḍimbā's epic background—as the wife of Bhīm and mother of Ghaṭotkaca—is a popular theme in the site itself, promoted by priests, vendors, and villagers alike. In addition, and as I noted above, curious tourists who wish to learn more about Haḍimbā are often referred to the signboards situated in the temple yard. One of these signboards, written in Hindi, opens with the following statement: “This pagoda-style temple was built by Raja Bahadur Singh in the year 1553. This temple is dedicated to the goddess Haḍimbā, who, in the Mahābhārata, was Bhīm's wife and Ghaṭotkaca's mother.” After thus foregrounding Haḍimbā's epic origin, the text goes on to note that “[i]n Kullu, she is believed to be an incarnation of the most powerful goddess Durgā and Kālī,” but soon reminds the readers of Haḍimbā's demonic background: “From birth, Haḍimbā was a *rākṣasī*, but having renounced and performed austerities, she became a goddess” (signboard, my translation).⁷² Interestingly, this signboard, which was put here by Haḍimbā's head *pujārī*, Rohitram Sharma, replaced an older signboard produced by “Hans Finance.” Whereas the new sign is almost identical to the previous one, the name of the goddess was changed here from *Hiḍimbā*—as the goddess is known in the epic—to *Haḍimbā*—as the goddess is known in the Kullu Valley. This correction, I would argue, is part of Rohitram's more general attempt to maintain and promote Haḍimbā's pan-

⁷² I will discuss the issue of Haḍimbā's deification in a few pages. It seems that the Puranic divide between gods and demons (as seen, for example, in the distribution of these groups to opposite sides of Vāsukī's rope in the famous myth of the churning of the ocean) is not so strict in the Kullu Valley and probably in the broader Himalaya as well. Sāgū, for example, who is worshipped in the upper parts of the Kullu Valley, is demonic in nature and sometimes referred to as '*rākṣis devtā*' ('demon god'). In other places, one can find the worship of the Kauravas (Sax 2000), and in Baijnāth temple in Palampur, where according to local traditions Rāyaṇa worshipped Lord Śiva, devotees refrain from celebrating the Daśahrā since it celebrates the death of Śiva's devotee (<http://www.himachaltourism.org/baijnath-temple-palampur.html>, accessed on July 29, 2012). At the same time, as we will see below, in the context of tourism it is very important for Haḍimbā's devotees to stress that she had indeed crossed the line and transformed herself into a goddess.

Indian associations, but to do so without undermining her authentic local character. We will see more of this in the next chapter, where I will discuss another important alteration made by Rohitram to this signboard in which he mentions Haḍimbā's close relationships with the local royal family and the buffalo sacrifice that is held in her honor during the annual Daśahrā festival.

Another set of signboards was fixed here by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). I was unable to establish when exactly the signs were established—none of the *pujārīs* seemed to remember it clearly—but it is likely that they were put up sometime after the site was declared a protected monument of national importance in 1967, as noted on the signs themselves. One of the signboards, in English, provides an elaborate description of the temple structure and its wooden carvings. It notes that the temple is dedicated to the goddess Haḍimbā, but reveals nothing about her identity. The parallel Hindi signboard provides almost the exact same information, but adds the following at the top: “Situated in the midst of thick deodar trees, this beautiful temple is dedicated to Hiḍimbā or Hirmā Devī, whose portrayal as the wife of Bhīm is mentioned in the Mahābhārata” (Signboard, my translation).

Since the temple was declared a protected monument in 1967, the ASI has participated in the maintenance of the structure and development of the site. It also employs several night guards, who spend their time in a small stone building in the temple yard. While the ASI representatives have some control over the temple, they are in no way the only ones in charge. It is beyond the scope of our present discussion to present the complete picture of the temple management. Suffice it is to say that several players collaborate here in running the show. The Forest Department, for example, takes care of the adjacent deodar grove park and fenced lawn. The *pujārīs*, who are entitled to

the monetary contributions made by devotees at Haḍimbā's stone feet at the inner cave, are in charge of the daily rituals and general caretaking. Others, such as Haḍimbā's *kārdār* (administrator) from Old Manali and his five helpers (*kāmdārs*), the elected committee members, the Thawi builders from Dhungri and several others, all participate in the maintenance tasks to varying degrees. Throughout the years, the ASI has conducted all sorts of conservation works at the site, such as chemically cleaning the wooden carvings (Mittra 1983: 156) and renovating part of the roof (Joshi 1992: 166). Their representatives, who arrived once or twice during my stay in Kullu, were welcomed by the priests, and the work plans were devised in good spirit and with seeming collaboration.⁷³

On my last day in the field, an exhibition was held by the ASI in the temple yard. A small makeshift stage was erected and the courtyard was surrounded with signboards glorifying the various pilgrimage centers across HP. Each signboard displayed a photo of a different location and a few descriptive paragraphs in English. The signboard concerning Haḍimbā's temple was the first in the line. "The temple," it read, "is dedicated to Hidimba, of the Mahabharata fame, married to Bhima, is the most influential (*sic.*) goddess in the valley." Spelling and grammatical difficulties aside, we can see that the ASI too made an effort to highlight the epic sides of Haḍimbā's personality.

The extent to which Haḍimbā's epic face was indeed communicated to visitors at the site was revealed to me repeatedly. Throughout my years in the field I used to

⁷³ Although I was actively looking for tensions on this front, especially between the *pujārīs* and the representatives of this state institution, I could never actually find any. The *pujārīs* insisted that the working relationships are good and that all is done with mutual collaboration. In fact, two of the ASI guard employed in the site are related to the *pujārīs* and often provide the ritual services when the other *pujārīs* are at rest.

occasionally take off my Kullu cap, “forget” my Hindi and roam the temple precincts pretending to be a clueless foreigner. I would approach random visitors, point to the temple and simply ask “what is this?” *All* of the people I asked associated Haḍimbā with the Mahābhārata and many of them mentioned that she was a forest *rākṣasī* as well. A random search for digital testimonies that some of these visitors upload to the internet reveals that this association is not forgotten after the fact. “RAJASTHANBYCAR,” for example, writes that Haḍimbā “was a Rakshasi, the wife of Bhim the Pandava, who became a Devi by her Tapasya”⁷⁴; Atul Gopal explains that the photo of a blood-stained wall he uploaded to Flickr was “found at a temple where animals are sacrificed to the demon deity Hadimba”⁷⁵; and Madhu and Savi from Santa Clara, California, who blog about their “multiyear trip through India,” write that “Manali’s Hadimba Temple is dedicated to the demon wife of Bhima, one of the five brave Pandavas of the epic, Mahabharata.”⁷⁶ The word about the demonic origin of the Dhungri goddess has even reached the all-knowing Wikipedia: The entree on “Hidimbi,” who “in the Hindu epic Mahābhārata is a Rakshasi,”⁷⁷ notes that “in certain parts of Himachal Pradesh Hidimbi is worshipped as a goddess. There is a temple dedicated to her in Manali.” A photo of the Dhungri temple is one of the two images that are displayed on this page.

As all this indicates, the goddess enshrined in the Dhungri temple near Manali is identified first and foremost with the Mahābhārata demoness. While other sides of her

⁷⁴ (http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Asia/India/State_of_Himachal_Pradesh/Manali-1092633/Things_To_Do-Manali-TG-C-1.html#ixzz1tjalDUI2 , accessed on May 2, 2012).

⁷⁵ (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/31188914@N05/5228459383/> , accessed on May 2, 2012)

⁷⁶ <http://10yearitch.com/india-travel-tour/himachal-pradesh/musical-manali/> , accessed On May 2, 2012

⁷⁷ (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hidimbi> , accessed on May 2, 2012),

identity are also present, and in certain cases even come to the fore, Haḍimbā's epic face, with its inevitable demonic associations, is the one that is highlighted, and even celebrated, in state publications, writings of ethnohistorians, travel guides, signboards, and digital testimonies of fascinated visitors. In the following pages I will analyze the reasons behind this state of affairs and discuss a few of the implications it carries for Haḍimbā's devotees.

Creative Solutions to a Demonic Problem

The foregrounding of Haḍimbā's demonic face, even in a touristic context where one might expect it to be toned down or even concealed completely, could attest to the antiquity and deep-rootedness of the goddess' epic associations in the local tradition. It is not, so it seems, something that could be shed off quickly or seamlessly.⁷⁸ Haḍimbā's name too, which even in its earlier pronunciations—Hirmā, Hurimbha, or Irma Devi—calls the Mahābhārata character to mind, may function in a similar way. It prevents the goddess' epic association from slipping out of memory. As long as the name remains, and it is hard to imagine its disappearance anytime soon, Haḍimbā's epic origin stays under the spotlight.

But there are other factors working here as well. Anyone who visits Haḍimbā's temple, can, for example, immediately sense its “*rākṣasī* atmosphere”: The location of the temple, in a thick forest at the fringes of the village; the many animal horns attached to its outer walls; the underground cave in which the goddess is enshrined; her unusually big feet curved in stone. “Just imagine how big she was,” one of Haḍimbā's *pujārīs* once

⁷⁸ This is, of course, not to say that it cannot happen over time and given certain conditions. See, for example, McDermott (2001), for the pacification of Kālī in Bengal, or Humes (1996), for similar processes in contemporary Vindhya, a village located midway between Allahabad and Banaras at the tip of the Vindhya mountain range.

told me, “if this was the size of her feet.” If one visits the temple at night, when there is no one around and the structure is lit with a faint yellow light, the effect is even greater. The same is even truer in winter, when the temple is cold and gloomy and everything in sight is covered with snow. At such times one can easily experience the *jungli* (wild) nature of this site, which is located at the edges of culture—a place of looming, threatening primeval forces. Devotees often advised me not to walk in front of the temple gate at night. You should walk around it, they said, it just isn’t safe. Needless to mention, in the dark, often misty Manali nights, I followed their advice meticulously.

Though Haḍimbā has always been a known figure throughout India⁷⁹ she gained a considerable nation-wide publicity with the airing of the famous TV serial Mahābhārat. Broadcasted on Doordarshan from September 1988 to July 1990, B.R. Chopra’s epic serial was watched by over 200 million viewers throughout the country and was highly influential (Mankekar 1999: 224). Although the show did not foreground an “ideological vision of a homogenous and exclusionary polity” as did the Sagar Rāmāyana⁸⁰ and was

⁷⁹ The Haḍimbā story is integral to many versions of the Mahābhārata, as can be seen in the Critical Edition, which draws in this episode on various manuscripts from both the Northern and Southern Recensions (Sukthankar 1933: 602-15). The tale is also a favorite theme in several performative arts. The Hiḍimbā Vivāha (Hiḍimbā’s wedding) is a common topic in Yakṣagāna performances, a traditional dance drama popular in the coastal districts of Karnataka (Dr. Purushothama Bilimale, private conversation). The story appears in the Baka Vadha (The Death of Baka), a Kathakali Dance Drama composed by Kottayath Tampuran (1645-1716) (Singh 2006b: 47-48), and in modern theater as well: Mātā Hiḍimbā is a modern feminist theater play written by Chetan Datar, a Marathi playwright, director and actor based in Mumbai that “focuses on issues of motherhood intertwined with race, caste and religion” (Narain 2003: 1680). Hiḍimbā also appears in several popular Telugu films, such as the famous 1957 *Maya Bazar*, and the 1966 *Shri Krishna Pandaviyam*, which tells the story of the Pāṇḍavas and includes their encounter with the forest Rākṣasī. A friend from Mumbai wrote to me about the impression of Hiḍimbā that was left on him by these movies: “The movies themselves are not about Hidimbi, nor is Hidimbi one of the main characters. But she has enough screen-time to make an impression. As I said, I always visualize Suryakantham from Maya Bazar whenever someone talks about Hidimbi.” (Sreechakra Goparaju, Email correspondence)

⁸⁰ Ramanand Sagar’s Rāmāyana, the other famous epic serial of the time, was aired between January 1987 and July 1988 and had a huge impact on India. Many scholars have noted the particular role it played in the forging of an exclusionary Hindu identity and the subsequent contribution to the rise of the Hindu right in the 1990s. See, for example, Mankekar (1999: 224-56) and van der Veer (1994: 175-76). Van der Veer also points out that in bringing “Ayodhya to millions of Hindus simultaneously in the privacy of their homes,”

“‘heard’ by a more inclusive audience” (Mankekar 1999: 226), the creator of the Mahābhārat did hope that it would promote unity and national integration.⁸¹ Interestingly, in Kullu, this integrating power was felt immediately:

Udi: When the tourists hear that this is Haḍimbā Mātā—Bhīm's wife, Ghaṭotkaca's mother—then what?
 Ramesh [one of Haḍimbā's *pujārīs*]: Aha, then they remember that ‘Yes! We have seen her. In the Mahābhārat, in the serial. There used to be a TV serial of the Mahābhārat and we have seen her there. Now we remember.’ This is what they say.⁸²

Even today many of the tourists whom I asked about Haḍimbā's identity mentioned the TV serial in their reply. Under these new circumstances, foregrounding the epic associations of the Dhungrī Haḍimbā made much sense. Not only was it a quick and efficient way to present the goddess to outsiders who knew very little about the local culture and the regional importance of Haḍimbā, it also provided the goddess and her devotees a unique place at the pan-Indian table. I will say more on this issue in the concluding section of this chapter.

the Rāmāyana serial also “aided the VHP's cause of turning a black page in the history of the Hindu nation by liberating Rama's birthplace” (van der Veer 1994: 161). By this, of course, van der Veer refers to the notorious destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992. An interesting anecdote is that Ramanand Sagar, whose family still owns the luxurious Sagar Resort hotel situated a few minutes' walk from Haḍimba's temple, used to visit Manali a lot and, according to Haḍimba's head *pujārī*, was an ardent devotee of the goddess.

⁸¹ In an interview with Chopra, Mankekar questions him regarding the political undertones of Bhīṣma's speech on his deathbed, in the episode that concluded the serial. Chopra, as Mankekar reports in her own words, admitted that “today it is important to focus on the ‘unity’ underlying the ‘diversity’ of Indian culture. However, he claimed, even though the contemporary nation is qualitatively ‘different’ from that of Vyasa's time, this notion of ‘unity’ is in keeping with Vyasa's idea of national integration” (Mankekar 1999: 237-38)

⁸² Ramesh, Haḍimbā temple, January 19, 2011, note 1. Interestingly, it is quite plausible that the airing of the Mahābhārat had an impact on the ASI as well. Until 1992, the Dhungrī goddess was referred to in the ASI reports as “Hidamba” (see, for example, Mitra 1983: 156). In the 1986-7 review, which was published only in 1992 and was the first to come out after the telecasting of the serial, the name of the goddess suddenly changed to “Hidimba,” and remained so to date (Joshi 1992: 166). While I was not able to determine the reason for this change decisively, it seems quite plausible that the authors of the report, having watched the popular TV serial themselves, realized they were misspelling the name of the epic character and changed it accordingly to Hiḍimbā.

Yet as Elmore rightly notes, the foregrounding of Haḍimbā's epic character does bring to mind her demonic sides. Many visitors to the temple, especially those coming from Bengal, where Haḍimbā is widely known for being a *rākṣasī*, keep seeing her as a demon. One day Lalchnad humorously imitated the reaction of Bengalis when they realize the true identity of the goddess they have just worshipped: "But Hiḍimbī is a *rakṣī*." "But what do they know?" he continued. The tension, however, remains, and much effort is devoted to solving it. As we will see, the solutions do not entail the concealment of Haḍimbā's demonic origins or the foregrounding of the Durgā-related aspects at their expense. On the contrary. Haḍimbā's *rākṣasī* nature is engaged rather carefully and with the genuine aim of explaining it, rather than explaining it away.

Most of the efforts of dealing with Haḍimbā's demonic nature are undertaken by the officiating priests. They are the ones who keep facing the tourists who inquire about the identity of the goddess and demand an explanation as to why she is deified here. The priests employ several tactics in dealing with this apparent anomaly. The first is to argue that for various reasons it was absolutely necessary for Haḍimbā to be born a *rākṣasī*. I often heard the *pujārīs* explain that in the great struggle between Bhīm and Haḍimbā's cannibal brother Haḍimb, the former could not amass enough strength to overcome the latter. No matter how much he tried, and what tricks did he pull, he could not subdue the powerful Haḍimb. It was only after Haḍimbā intervened, the *pujārīs* explain, and bestowed on Bhīm her own demonic power (*rākṣasī śakti*) that the latter was finally able to slain his nonhuman rival.

Such transfer of power is not only absent from the telling of the episode in the critical edition of the Mahābhārata, but the underlying logic of that scene seems to counter the Manali version of it. In the critical edition version, Bhīm does not find

subduing Haḍimb to be such a challenging task. He ridicules him and finds the whole battle amusing: “Bhīmasena laughed when he saw the Rākṣasa rage at his sister, and he said to him, ‘Why must you wake up these people, Hiḍimba [Hiḍimb]? They are sleeping so peacefully! Hurry up, attack me, nitwit of a man-eater!’.” As the battle lingers on, the other Pāṇḍavas wake up and watch the fight. Arjun urges Bhīm to subdue Haḍimb quickly and does not seem to doubt his ability to do so: “Why take your time killing that evil Rākṣasa, Bhīma? We should go, we can’t stay here long, enemy-tamer.... Hurry, Bhīma, don't play with him. Kill the terrifying ogre before he uses his magic. Use the power of your arms!” Arjun even ridicules Bhīm for the long time it takes him to kill the demon: “If this Rākṣasa is too much for you, I’ll help you. Finish him off quickly! Or rather, I myself will finish him.” Upon hearing this, Bhīm “became very indignant; and crushing the Rākṣasa to the ground, he strangled him to death like a sacrificial animal.” When Bhīma contemplates killing Haḍimbā too, Arjun’s advice reveals that he does not recognize her as possessing any exceptional power: “Even in anger, tiger-like Bhīma, never kill a woman! Preserve the Law, Pāṇḍava, before you preserve your life. You have killed the mighty Rākṣasa who came intending to kill us. But what could his sister do to us, even if she is angry?” (Buitenen 1973: 297-300, 1(9)141-3).⁸³

The apparent challenge posed by the textual account to the local version of the episode in Manali seems to bother no one, nor any of the tourists who visit the site. Locals and tourists alike seem largely unfamiliar with the details of episode as it is recounted in the critical edition, and even if they do, they never mention it. I should clarify here that by noting the lack of people’s attention to this text I do not mean to

⁸³ The same logic and tone underlies Ganguli’s translation of the episode as well (Raya and Ganguli 1883-1896: *Adi Parva, Hidimva-vadha Parva, Section CLIV - CLIII*).

imply, neither explicitly nor implicitly, that the critical edition, or any other written version of the Mahābhārata for that matter, has any precedence over oral vernacular versions of it. I bring up the Critical Edition's version simply to suggest that this, as well as other aspects of the story as it is told in Manali, which do not appear in the text, should probably be seen as the product of an exegetic effort made by locals to solve the theological problem creatively.

Interestingly, Chopra's rendering of the scene, in episode 32 of the TV serial, is somewhat closer to the Manali version of it. There, when first attacked by Haḍimb with a magical ray of torching flame, Bhīm is taken by surprise and does not respond. He is soon saved by Haḍimbā, who intervenes by raising her hand, an act that miraculously puts off the scorching ray of fire. However, from this moment onward, Bhīm crushes the demon all by himself and without Haḍimbā's aid. The *rākṣasī* quickly lowers her hand and does not need to raise it again until her brother lies dead.

Another example of the same tactic, which seeks to justify the indispensability of Haḍimbā's demonic qualities, was apparently inferred by Rohitram Sharma, her chief priest. He confessed that he had contemplated the matter for a long time, then realized what must have been the reason behind it. The Pāṇḍavas, he explained, needed someone who could neutralize the powerful weapon (*astra*) kept by Karṇ for the purpose of killing Arjun. Not only did they need a mighty warrior, they needed that warrior fast. It was at this point that the *rākṣasī* Haḍimbā came into the picture. Rohitram's son, Ramesh Sharma, nicely summarized this point:

And there is what I told you about her [Haḍimbā] being a rakṣasī. She took on this form [of a rākṣasī] for a reason. Karṇ had a weapon which he kept for killing Arjun. [This weapon] needed to be stopped. Now, when a son of rākṣas is born, he grows up in no time. Immediately. This happens very fast. This is why she [Haḍimbā] took on the form of a rākṣasī. The *mātā* had made him

[Ghaṭotkaca] so powerful, so he could finish off all the Kauravas. But he had no permission to do so. Haḍimbā gave him all her power (Ramesh, Haḍimbā temple, January 17, 2011, note 3).

Haḍimbā's demonic nature was necessary for producing Ghaṭotkaca, a mighty warrior who could appear on the scene in no time and, equipped with his mother's demonic powers, wreak havoc with the armies of the Kauravas to such an extent that he needed to be killed with Karṇa's weapon. Once this weapon, which could only be fired once, was used, Arjun's life was immediately saved. Ghaṭotkaca, Ramesh concluded, sacrificed his own life for the sake of Dharma. Rohitram has recently promoted his exegesis further by fixing a signboard near Ghaṭotkaca's tree shrine which states the following:

The hero Ghaṭotkaca's birth took place in the womb of Mātā Haḍimbā (who was a *rākṣasī* by birth) for a special purpose. His father was the Pāṇḍava brother Bhīm. The literal meaning of [the name] Ghaṭotkaca is 'he whose head is smooth like a pitcher' [bald-headed]. His birth took place in order to destroy, by sacrificing himself, the infallible weapon that Karṇa, the son of Sūrya, kept for killing Arjun. He, who was supremely powerful, was a devotee of the mātā. Following the order of his mother Haḍimbā, he came twice to help his Pāṇḍav clan. (Signboard near Ghaṭotkaca's tree shrine in Dhungri, my translation).

A second tactic employed for solving the difficulty caused by Haḍimbā's demonic nature is to argue that while she was indeed born a *rākṣasī*, she had eventually turned into a goddess. Here too, the interpretations offered are not meant to conceal or tone down Haḍimbā's epic associations, but make a creative use of these associations in delivering the point. Thus, for example, many in Manali explain that Haḍimbā had undergone a fundamental transformation when she married Bhīm. Just like any other bride in India, they explain, whose *jāti* (literally 'genus' or 'species,' but usually understood as 'caste') changes so it matches her husband's, so was Haḍimbā's demonic nature transformed when she married Bhīm. This notion, we should note, is common in many places in India

and is already mentioned in the Laws of Manu. Here is how Julia Leslie summarizes Manu's point:

A woman's varna...is defined by that of her husband: whatever her father's birth or her own behavior, she assumes in the 'oneness' of marriage both the qualities and the status of her husband, merging with him as a river merges with the sea (cf. Manu IX.22-24; X.67) (Leslie 1989: 39).⁸⁴

Thus, once she had married the Kṣatriya prince Bhīm—who, being the son of the wind god Vāyu, is a divine figure himself—Haḍimbā's *jāti* began to change. This, however, was only the first phase in the process of her divination. The next important step, in which Haḍimbā underwent a final transformation, came later, right after the Mahābhārata war. The Bengalis who think Haḍimbā is a *rākṣasī*, Lalchand continued in his observations mentioned above, do so because they only know half of the story. They do not know what happened *after* the Mahābhārata war. They have simply never heard about it. Ramesh explained exactly what happened:

When Kṛṣṇa heard about the sacrifice made by Ghaṭotkaca [who had sacrificed himself in order to save Arjun's life], he went before Haḍimbā. He told her: "I salute you!" (*praṇām kartā hūm*). Haḍimbā then replied: "Lord, I have nothing left! I had a son, but I gave him away for the sake of dharma. Now what will I do? Where will I go?" So he [Kṛṣṇa] said "go and I will give you my blessing. Go and meditate (*tap karo*). In the Kaliyug," he said, "which is the eon that is presently under way...so many people will worship you! They will worship you as they will worship no other god or goddess.... You will be the greatest goddess of all. You will have the powers of all [the other gods]. This is what he [Kṛṣṇa] said (Ramesh, Haḍimbā temple, January 17, 2011, note 3).

This story is sometimes told to particularly interested tourists who are lucky enough to visit the temple in relatively less busy times. Note how the narrative not only

⁸⁴ Similar views are held in contemporary India as well. Inden and Nicholas, for example, report on the *gotra-parivartana* segment of the wedding ritual in Bengal, where the bride takes on her husband's lineage (Inden and Nicholas 1977: 48), and William Sax discusses the similar transformations young brides are believed to undergo in the eyes of contemporary Garhwali males (Sax 1991: 77-84).

explains Haḍimbā's deification, but also associates the process with Kṛṣṇa, the great god of the Mahābhārata. In addition—and since it is common knowledge around Manali that it was here, in the cave inside the Dhungri temple, that Haḍimbā finally sat in meditation—this story establishes a unique and singular link between her and the site itself. It is in this location, and in this location alone, that the famous Haḍimbā performed her austerities and eventually became a goddess. While other temples to Haḍimbā could, theoretically at least, exist in places that mark other episodes in her life, this key event in her biography could only be marked in one place! Here!⁸⁵

Importantly, while there are several other competing explanations for the arrival of Haḍimbā in her temple in Dhungri, these parallel stories are never brought up in this context. In fact, such stories are hardly ever mentioned at all. It is quite clear that they are pushed to the background and slowly being forgotten. In present-day Manali, where Haḍimbā's postwar meditation story is instrumental in establishing her identity as the Mahābhārata figure and in explaining her subsequent deification, it is not surprising that there is no room for competing narratives that might undermine its genuineness.⁸⁶

Haḍimbā's *rākṣasī* origin, however, is not the only difficulty resulting from the foregrounding of her epic associations. There are several other problems that arise in this regard. A particularly interesting one, which is intimately related to the singularity of

⁸⁵ Of course, other places could also claim the same status for themselves. This, however, only becomes a problem if the two places become aware of each other and decide to clash over this status. Until this happens, the uniqueness and singularity this narrative bestows in the eyes of local devotees on the Dhungri temple remains unshaken.

⁸⁶ One of these stories, for example, tells of Haḍimbā's arrival in Dhugri after she had stolen the divine power of Śarbari Mātā, whom she served (*sevā karnā*). When I asked Lalchand about the apparent discrepancy between the two stories he explained it (away?) by saying that the two events took place in different ages (*yug*). Since I was under the impression he did not want to discuss this issue further, I decided to leave it at that. Interestingly, the narrative difficulty entailed by this story, which is relatively well known among Haḍimbā's devotees since it is ritually commemorated during a certain festival, did not seem to bother anyone but me.

Haḍimbā's temple in the eyes of her devotees, results from new data brought to the site by visiting tourists. As it turns out, Hiḍimbā is also quite a popular goddess in Assam, where she is worshipped by the members of the Dimasa-Kachari community. The latter consider Haḍimbā an ancient Dimasa princess and see themselves as descendants of Ghaṭotkaca, her son. The name of the ancient capital of the Dimasas, Dimapur (now in Nagaland), is believed by many to be a corruption of Hidimbapur - the city of Hiḍimbā.⁸⁷

Haḍimbā's *pujārīs*, who, following the growth of tourism to the region, began facing thousands of Assamese who reported this very same thing, could not simply ignore the information and continue arguing for the singularity of their goddess. The main problem was that just as the residents of Kullu believed that Haḍimbā and her brother Haḍimb used to live in the surrounding forests, so did the Assamese, who were positive she used to reside in their area. This conflict of narratives, a direct result of the flow of people and ideas brought about by tourism, needed to be solved. The difficulty, as I inferred from the offered solution, was to explain how it could be that Haḍimbā resided both here, in Kullu, and in the distant land of Assam. The resolution of this conundrum was explained to me by Lalchand and Chinulal (Chinu) his son:

[Following Chinu's conversation with tourists in the temple I learn that Haḍimbā used to live in Assam.]

Udi: So she lived in Assam?

Lalchand: Yes!

Chinu: Her main capital was there – Dimāpur...the old name was 'Haḍimbāpur'.

Udi: So the fight between Bhīm and Haḍimb did not take place here but there?

Lalchand: No no, it is not like that. From Assam to here, the whole Himalaya was hers.

Chinu: That time, there was no distance problem. They could go from one place to another like that (Chinu clicks his fingers to signal a brief moment)

⁸⁷ On the Dimasas of Assam, see Bordoloi (1984). For the folk-tale relating them to Haḍimbā, see Ghosh and Ghosh (1998: 13).

Udi: Like with an airplane?

Lalchand: Wherever she wanted [to be], that where she was [*jahān chāhā, vahān rahā*]

Udi: Immediately

Chinu: Within [a] second

Lalchand: If she wanted [to arrive in] Dimāpur, she arrived in Dimāpur. If she wanted [to arrive in] Manu temple she arrived in Manu Temple.

Udi: It was very easy...

Lalchand: very easy...maybe this technique will come in the future...(laughs)
(Lalchand and Chinulal, Haḍimbā temple, January 12, 2011, note 2).

I find several issues to be particularly interesting here. First, the difficulty arose only as a result of a touristic encounter, which brought two distinct populations in contact with one another. The ensuing exchange of information revealed a hitherto unrealized tension. Second, the theological discrepancy, which obviously caused great discomfort to the officiating priests, had to be solved. As with the case of Rohitram above, who admitted he looked for a way to explain Haḍimbā's demonic nature, here too the theological difficulty led to an active process of interpretation which yielded an original exegetical solution. One can easily imagine how this explanation might be further developed throughout the years and yield a "new," more elaborate narrative depicting Haḍimbā's history. Third, the solution offered by the *pujārīs* was not simply "invented" out of thin air but seems to have been inferred by them from other myths and stories. Chinulal applied a known fact—the flying abilities of *rākṣasas*—to the theological problem he was facing, and drew his conclusion from it. This example, of a process that took place in a lived religious context, provides a valuable insight into the way in which new traditions are created. It was revealing to see how quickly and seamlessly an inference could turn into an established fact.

Conclusion

Various places across India are understood to be associated with some epic or mythic tale:

[A]nywhere one goes in India, one finds living landscape in which mountains, rivers, forests, and villages are elaborately linked to the stories of the gods and heroes. The land bears the traces of the gods and the footprints of the heroes. Every place has its story, and conversely, every story in the vast storehouse of myth and legend has its place (Eck 2012: 4).

A.K. Ramanujan calls this phenomenon “localization”—a process in which pan-Indian epic and mythic narratives, events and characters are associated with particular localities:

[T]he folk renditions localize the pan-Indian epics and myths, often with the help of local names, places, motifs, and folk etymology. Various local places, hills, rivers, trees, and birds are given names that connect them with the great gods (Ramanujan 1986: 67)

Numerous instances of this phenomenon can be found all across the subcontinent. At times, the localization is rather widespread, as in the case of Kerala, where the region’s very soil is associated with the body of the goddess Bhagavatī. The goddess is believed to be present “in every part of the landscape: the mountains are her breasts, the lowland areas where rice and coconut grow her body, loins, and genitals” (Caldwell 1999: 150). In other instances the pan-Indian narratives are localized in specific locations, though together they still cover large geographical areas. Such is the case, for example, with the fifty-one Śakti Pīṭhas, which are spread throughout the subcontinent, marking the places where the dismembered parts of goddess Satī fell to earth according to the famous myth.⁸⁸ Yet at other times, a single location is associated with a particular widely-known event, such as in the case of the Janam Bhumi temple in Mathura, which is

⁸⁸ For studies of the Śakti Pīṭhas, see Sircar (1973) and Das (1999).

believed to be the birth place of Lord Kṛṣṇa,⁸⁹ or the famous temple in Ayodhya, notoriously known for the deadly events of 1992, which is believed by many to be the birthplace of Lord Rām. In many other cases the particular location is simply associated with a famous figure, whose specific deeds are known only to the immediate residents of the locality—a boulder that was thrown by Bhīm, an open field where Lord Rām camped for a night, and so on and so forth. In Kullu too, and as we have seen before, different locations are associated with the adventures of the Pāṇḍavas while roaming the forest.

Localization, as Ramanujan explains, is but one result of the interaction between classical myths and their folk versions in India, the others being, in his view, domestication and contemporizing. This pair—classical myths and their folk versions—is but one of five that Ramanujan identifies as comprising the two realms of Kannada folklore (the others being folktales and myths, folk myths and classical myths, and more). The fundamental contrast defined and illustrated by these pairs, Ramanujan argues, is the one between domestic and public settings, which correspond to the ancient Dravidian categories of *akam* and *puram* of the classical Tamil poetry. Thus, the folk, localized versions of the classical translocal narratives bring the latter closer to home, by domesticating, localizing, and contemporizing the more distant themes. They “tip mythology, a public form, toward a more domestic genre,” thus making them familiar, close and accessible (Ramanujan 1986: 64).

But localization does other things as well. It connects discrete locations to one another by weaving them together into larger encompassing narratives. Moving between these places—either physically, as in pilgrimage, or even just mentally, as in

⁸⁹ The temple’s *garbhgrh* is believed to be the prison cell where Kṛṣṇa’s parents were jailed and from which Kṛṣṇa was smuggled after he was born.

storytelling—interrelates them in people’s minds, thus constructing them as unified regions. Anne Feldhaus, who studies the working of such mechanisms in Maharashtra, summarizes the matter as follows:

People bring regions into being by moving across the landscape, or by picturing themselves—or a palanquin, a pole, a bedstead, a *kāvāḍ*, or a river—moving across the landscape. They tell stories about the travels of the gods, then imitate those journeys in their own pilgrimages. They remember the biography of a divine incarnation, and they visit, physically or in acts of recollection, places where he sat, slept, spoke, ate, or even defecated. People differentiate one region from others to which it is opposed, but they also connect places in one region with those in another (Feldhaus 2003: 211).

Once a regional awareness has been established, it often gives rise to a sense of belonging and thus shapes people’s identity:

In some cases, the sense of region as place includes a sense of the place as one’s *own* place, one’s home, a place that one belongs to and that belongs to one in some important way. Even further, awareness of *where* one is (or where one comes from) can become an important element in understanding *who* one is: it can become a vital aspect of a person’s identity (Feldhaus 2003: 7).

What works for a region like Maharashtra, works, on other levels, for the whole of India as well. Diana Eck speaks of the pan-Indian network of interlinked places that weave the local into the translocal. She highlights the importance of pilgrimage in this regard:

The pilgrim's India is a vividly imagined landscape that has been created not by homing in on the singular importance of one place, but by the linking, duplication, and multiplication of places so as to constitute an entire world. The critical rule of thumb is this: Those things that are deeply important are to be widely repeated. The repetition of places, the creation of clusters and circles of sacred places, the articulation of groups of four, five, seven, or twelve sites—all this constitutes a vivid symbolic landscape characterized not by exclusivity and uniqueness, but by polycentricity, pluralism, and duplication. Most important, this "imagined landscape" has been constituted not by priests and their literature, though there is plenty of literature to be sure, but by countless millions of pilgrims who have generated a powerful sense of land, location, and belonging through journeys to their hearts’ destinations (Eck 2012: 5).

While pilgrimage and tourism are not one and the same thing, the latter is in many ways the modern avatar of the former.⁹⁰ Modern tourists, who roam the country far and wide, connect places to one another. Coming from all over the country they visit localities, hear their traditions, worship their deities, and go back home to tell about it to their families, neighbors and friends (and nowadays, also upload their findings to the web). They participate in the integration of localities into the pan-Indian grid and in forging a sense of a unified and cohesive India. The historically peripheral region of the Kullu Valley too is thus integrated into the rest of the country and finds its proper place within it. In the process, locals' identity is reshaped and a new sense of self is created—one which though still far-away is nevertheless strongly affiliated with the center and does so in unique and fascinating ways.

Locals in Manali contribute to this process too, by foregrounding Haḍimbā's epic face and highlighting her role in the Mahābhārata. Presenting their goddess to visiting outsiders they emphasize her marriage with Bhīm and her mothering of Ghaṭotkaca while sidelining the other aspects of her personality. Whereas the latter aspects are not gone, and are foregrounded in other contexts, in the context of tourism they are secondary at best. The demonic aspects of Haḍimbā's personality are not concealed but justified creatively and original narratives recount her subsequent deification. They explain Haḍimbā's transformation through marriage (with Bhīm), divine authority (Kṛṣṇa's instructions), and meditative austerities (performed by Haḍimbā herself). When the need arises, new revelations about competing pan-Indian manifestations of the goddess are

⁹⁰ Shinde defines the difference as follows: "While the focus in pilgrimage is on the association with some sacred and numinous supernatural power and the ability to go closer to it by means of religious practices, tourism is mainly about 'getting away' to experience a change, and is replete with hedonistic pursuits" (Shinde 2007: 184). Yet as many scholars' work indicates, they are often also intertwined in many ways. See, for example, Gold (1988: 262-98).

accommodated, and narrative tools are employed to retain the authenticity of both Haḍimbā and her faraway avatars.

As we have seen, while one would expect Haḍimbā's *rākṣasī* sides to be toned down or completely pushed to the background, the reality on the ground is just the opposite. Whereas in other places in India such demonic goddesses sometimes undergo pacification and assimilation in the image of the great goddess, this is not the case with Haḍimbā.⁹¹ While Elmore argues that state institutions are trying to promote a presentation of Haḍimbā that equates her with the Great Goddess and Durgā, the reality on the ground, as well as in paper and online publication, is completely the reverse. Haḍimbā's demonic side is highlighted and even celebrated as an essential trait that was indispensable to the role she played in the epic. In the following chapter we will see that this is true not only with regard to narratives about the goddess, but also when it comes to the bloody ritual practices associated with her. Haḍimbā's demonic and bloodthirsty nature is displayed and celebrated in Manali more than ever before.

Why is this the case? Why has Haḍimbā been able to retain her demonic nature when there are so many reasons for it to be concealed? We have already discussed the possibility that longstanding associations with the epic, the demonic atmosphere in the temple, and the effect of the famous Mahābhārat TV serial, made this side of Haḍimbā's personality hard to do away with. But is that all? Or could there be something else? In her "Many Masks, Many Selves," Wendy Doniger speaks of how sometimes people become

⁹¹ Cynthia Humes, for example, shows how Vindhyavāsīnī, a traditionally violent goddess of tantric background, has recently been pacified, and affiliated with the more general Sanskritic Great Goddess (Devī). Her local tantric text, the *Vindhya mähātmya*, is concealed while the Brahmanic *Devī Mähātmya* is foregrounded and actively promoted by the priests. The image presented to the visiting tourists is of an all-India Great Goddess while her tantric "impure" origins are actively being sidelined and subsequently forgotten (Humes 1996).

what other people imagine them to be. This, as she herself points out, is often the case with tourism:

The inhabitants of places known for their ethnic charm, where tourism has become a major industry, consciously exaggerate their own stereotypes to please the visitors: the British lay on the ‘ye olde’ with a shovel, the Irish their blarney, the Parisians their disdain for tourists (Doniger 2006: 60).

In the case of the Pahari people in general, and that of Manali and Dhungri village in particular, this seems to be especially true. Many in this region are aware of the fact that the lowlanders (*niche vāle*) often think of the mountain people as backward, primitive, and at times even demonic. The British thought so, as we have seen above, and so did Parmar and his elite friends, who were determined to correct this image by developing and modernizing the land. Interestingly, such ideas still prevail today in the Kullu Valley itself. Dunichand, an elderly resident of Dhungri village, explained:

[We are having a quiet conversation in the grove leading to Haḍimbā’s temple when a few Indian tourists pass us by. It is clear they are making a few remarks about us among themselves.]

Dunichand: They must have said: “He is a mountain man [Pahari], a person of the jungle”

Udi: This is what they think?

Dunichand: Yes, I believe so.

Udi: What do they think? [...]

Dunichand: [When they speak to us,] they think: “Can they even speak English? Do they understand my language? This is because they are city people. They think of themselves as very developed. They are overconfident...We are indeed forest people, but we do know some things.

Udi: What else do these people think?

Dunichand: They think “these people are backward. They are not intelligent. They don’t have knowledge. They don’t understand what I am talking to them - do they understand? Don’t they?” (Dunichand, grove leading to Haḍimbā’s temple, March 29, 2011, note 2).

Such views about the people of Manali and Dhungri are expressed by residents of the lower parts of the Kullu valley as well, who also perceive people who live higher in

the mountains as *jungli* and demonic. I recall how once a person residing in a village only ten to twelve kilometers downstream from Manali, tried to convince me that I should not waste my valuable research time with “those people.” “They are like *rākṣasas*,” he explained. They are ignorant and backward, and know almost nothing of their own religion either.

Locals’ foregrounding of Haḍimbā’s *rākṣasī* nature is, in some ways, a celebration of their own nature, as perceived by others. We have here a situation in which locals, accused of being peripheral Others, do not resist and reject that accusation, but rather embrace and celebrate it as what empowers them and makes them special. Interestingly, it seems that in some ways, this ‘tactic’ has been there all along. The wild, majestic and unrestrained nature of the Himalaya has always been central to its alluring power. The rocky mountains and the dense harsh forests have been a source of appeal for mythical sages as well as for very real renunciators and wandering sadhus, who retired here in search of powers and meditation. It is the very ‘*junglī*’ quality of these regions, their exotic otherness and potential dangers, that is the source of their fascinations. Bhīm, we may recall, was helpless and could not overcome Haḍimb without the *rākṣasī* powers bestowed on him by Haḍimbā. So too was Arjun, and the Pāṇḍavas’ armies, without the help of the half-*rākṣasa* Ghaṭotkaca. This primordial potential of the high mountains, is, after all, part of what makes this the land of the gods.⁹²

But the foregrounding of Haḍimbā’s demonic nature may signal other things as well. The famous forest *rākṣasī* also sports a unique intermediary personality that lends itself to transformation and change. She is a *rākṣasī* who is fascinated by a man who

⁹² About the chaotic, yet generative, fertile and productive powers of mountains, rivers and forests, in traditional Indian imagination, see Shulman (1980: 3-89) and Feldhaus (1995: 17-43, 89-156).

comes up from the plains, and, dazzled by his beauty, she falls in love with him. She subsequently turns her back on her brother, who was evil indeed, yet her kin. Haḍimbā herself acknowledges this fact in her conversation with Kuntī: “I have forsaken my friends and my law and my kin, and, good lady, chosen your tigerlike son for my man” (Buitenen 1973: 300, 1(9)143). On the other hand, even once she marries Bhīm, Haḍimbā’s transformation is not complete. After all, she stays behind in the forest, and never joins her human husband when he returns home. Haḍimbā’s in-between personality can also be seen in her portrayal in the TV serial, where she reminds her brother that unlike him she abhors and refrains from eating human flesh.

As such, Haḍimbā captures much of the mountain people’s ambivalence towards the people of the plains. Like her, they do not remain indifferent to them. Proud of their land, religion and way of life on the one hand, they also seek the company of lowlanders and admire their wit and wealth. Like Haḍimbā, they try to strike alliances, form relationships, and, in the context of tourism, promote business connections and collaborations (see, Smaller 1997). For the host of mostly urban middle-class pilgrims who visit her today, Haḍimbā’s intermediary personality is also uniquely alluring. She is the demonic, bloodthirsty and exotic Other who is at the same time familiar, accessible and, now, also part of themselves. Like the primordial mountains that surround her, she provides a peek into a bygone wild past, which is fascinating just as it is frightening.

There are two main issues that remain to be seen in this regard, in the coming years and decades—first, whether Haḍimbā will indeed remain in this unique border-line position and retain both her wild personality and her popularity among locals and visitors; Second, whether tourism, the modern form of the collaboration between the mountain people and the people of the plains, will yield good fortune to all parties

involved. After all, it could go the other way. As in the case of Ghaṭotkaca, himself a fruit of such a union, there could yet be a heavy price to pay.

CHAPTER TWO: For the Sake of Śānti—Buffalo Sacrifice to the Goddess Haḍimbā

June 28, 2009

I learned about the upcoming performance of the buffalo sacrifice about a month in advance and decided to dedicate the whole month to exploring it. The task was not hard since villagers were in eager anticipation of the event and were quite happy to discuss it. They explained that the ritual is called *aḥārah bali* (eighteen-fold sacrifice) since it includes eighteen different offerings that are sacrificed to the goddess. Devotees promised that deities from neighboring villages would visit the event, as well as many villagers. Each delegation would bring a sheep with it, which they would offer to the goddess in the sacrifice. Money for the event is being collected as we speak, they explained, by committee members in charge of organizing the event. The main attention of the people with whom I spoke was given to the buffalo. It is a big animal, they said, “we will hold it with ropes and cut it in front of the temple.”⁹³ Jo Grad said I should wait and see Haḍimbā’s *gur* (medium) on that day, and how he will roll out his tongue. He asked if I had seen goddess Kālī’s famous image, where she sticks out her red bloody tongue. This is how the *gur* will look on that day, he promised, making sure I remembered that Kālī is one of Haḍimbā’s eighteen forms. This is the reason they give her the buffalo, he concluded.

“Have you ever cut a buffalo yourself?” I asked someone. “No” he replied horrified. “You need a strong heart for that.” The person confessed that his heart was not tough enough for the task. He reminded me that the ‘cutter’ (*kāṭne vālā*) needs to lift a very big ‘drat’, and be very precise. This is not easy, he stressed, since it is a big sword.

⁹³ In in local parlance “to cut” (Hnd. *kāṭnā*) means to behead or kill with a curved slaughtering knife.

My attempts to locate this ‘drat’ beforehand turned futile. Nobody could provide a definitive answer as to where it was. Some said it was in the temple. It wasn’t. Others said the *pujārīs* had it. But the latter kept referring me to one another. Still others said it was at some person’s house, only they couldn’t agree on whose house exactly. It finally turned up only on the day of the event itself.

The buffalo arrived in the village rather late—only two-three days before the sacrifice. It was brought in someone’s truck from “somewhere below” (*nīche se*). It was then tied up in an old house’s yard, in Dhungri village. It was fed there and treated with care by the residents of that house. I tried to find out why the buffalo was kept there, instead of anywhere else. “We always keep it here,” people explained, “this is the tradition.”

On the day of the event the Devī made her way to the Dhungri temple from Old Manali. As always when she leaves for festivals, her palanquin was assembled in Manu’s temple, with whom she shares her *rath*, and the procession then made its way to Haḍimbā’s temple in Dhungri. Upon arrival in the temple ground I could see that preparations were well under way. Huge pots (*kaḍāī*) were already placed on piles of burning wood with food cooking in them. Villagers from Old Manali were sitting on a big square plastic sheet that was spread on the concrete ground, and were busy cutting big piles of onions, garlic, tomatoes and spinach. There were already many people present and more kept coming as time progressed. Delegations from neighboring villages started to arrive, accompanied by drummers, trumpeters and other musicians. A *pujārī* carried the *ghanṭī ḍaurj* (censer and bell), which spread the sweet smell of burning juniper, and were quickly taken inside the temple. The sheep that was brought by the group was soon taken to the kitchen area or behind the room of the ASI guards. Villagers kept greeting

each other in these early hours of the day—old friends and acquaintances who probably had not seen each other for a while. A few tourists, domestic and foreigner, mixed in the crowd: Punjabi families, honeymooners from Delhi, short-sleeved Israeli girls, tattooed Russians. I overheard Tirthram, Haḍimbā's *kārdār*,⁹⁴ explaining the situation to a curious family of Sikhs. He said they were about to sacrifice a buffalo to the goddess Haḍimbā. “She is Kālī,” he said. “This is our custom.” He emphasized that the sacrifice was meant to bring peace and tranquility [*śānti*] to the whole world.

Moving through the crowd I suddenly ran into Rajaram (pseudonym). He was holding a huge drat covered with shiny red cloth. “Are you the cutter?” I asked. I knew from before that he was hoping to be the one, but there could be others as well, who might still step up. If that happened, devotees explained, a draw would be cast. “Yes, yes,” Rajaram answered, “I’m gonna do it!” He was quite excited, I could tell. “Where did you get the *drāt*?” I asked. “Dandu gave it to me,” he answered. Or so I thought. It was very crowded and noisy and Rajaram wasn’t too clear.

Throughout my graduate studies and while preparing for my field research, I always advocated an ‘on-the-ground’ approach to the study of religion. Rituals in particular, I thought, should be studied from participants’ points of view. Impressed by the critique leveled by Crapanzano against the all-knowing bird’s-eye point of view that is sometimes taken by ethnographers, I decided I would do my best to avoid it (Crapanzano 1986). I will choose a particular embodied position, preferably somewhere from within the crowds, and commit myself to describing the event from there, I thought. I will not attempt to describe the event from an allegedly all-knowing transcendent point

⁹⁴ Kārdār (manager, administrator), is the person who is administratively in charge of the deity’s rituals. He is usually one of the most influential persons in the circle of people in charge of managing the worship of the deity.

of view. Completely forgetting my agenda at the moment of truth, I quickly found myself climbing on the roof of the guards' room, in search of a panoramic view. Armed with my camera, I was now surrounded by a bunch of excited teenaged boys, well-positioned to see the event, or so I hoped.

I saw the *gurs* of the gods sitting in the yard in front of the temple, trembling in trance. So were Tirthram, the *kārdār*, and several of Haḍimbā's *pujārīs*, as well as a few people from the crowd. There was also one woman who screamed violently and jumped frantically around. I saw the cooking area on the left of the temple and the smoke coming up from the fire. I saw people standing on the big rock to the right of the temple and many village women squeezed together on the wooden balcony. I also got a good view when they brought in the buffalo, wrapped him in red cloth and paraded him around the temple. I am quite positive that I also heard Rajaram shouting and insisting that he was going to be the one who would do it. Rajaram later confirmed this, saying that a few others stepped up too, but he made it clear that they would need to wait for another chance. I gathered that having a huge drat at his disposal must have had an impact on his contenders, who soon acceded with no draw being cast. In rituals, I took a mental note, performance on the ground does not always follow the script.

Throughout the time I was sitting on the roof I was forbidden to take photos by a big angry man who was sitting next to me. A policeman on the ground also waived his index figure whenever I lifted my camera. Photos are not allowed, he signaled. When I tried to argue, the man next to me ordered me to "shut up!" He wouldn't take no for an answer.

I then saw Rajaram lifting the *drāt*. He was wearing a red baseball cap and seemed in control. But that was all I saw, since the crowd surrounded him and hid him

from view. I was becoming increasingly frustrated for sitting so far away. The people around me started counting out loud and I figured they were counting the blows. Many stopped at about five, others at six, and I could also hear a bit of seven in the air. I then saw a group of boys dragging the head of the beast down the temple stairs, and then the heavy body as well. The buffalo, as I was told in advance, was not eaten by the people but simply “thrown away somewhere near the river.” It started raining a few minutes before and the roof got quite slippery. My mood was deteriorating quickly. I couldn’t really see a thing, I was so remote this was nothing like I thought it would be; “Why did I climb so high?”, I kept asking myself. Why didn’t I mix with the crowd? How can it be that despite all my criticism I eventually found myself watching this event from high on a roof, the closest I could possibly get to a bird’s eye-view? Two years later, when another sacrifice took place, I was less than two meters away from the buffalo. That, indeed, was another experience all together.

I felt a big void after the ritual ended. The main attraction was over and we still had many hours ahead of us. People hung around: noisy groups of boys, young girls, old man wearing woolen coats smoking *bīḍīs* and drinking chai. The front yard was sticky with the buffalo’s blood, and so were the four corners of the temple, where several sheep had been sacrificed at the same time as the buffalo. The cooking went on and many villagers were running around: skinning the sheep, cutting the meat, and organizing the ground for dinner. Red pieces of cloth were distributed among the people, as in every other ritual to the goddess. At around 4 pm the feast began. Long canvases were spread on the ground and people rushed in to find a seat. Paper plates were distributed and glasses with water were placed in front each person. Servers with straw baskets started serving the rice. Others, with metal buckets filled with meat and “soup,” poured

measured portions on the rice. People ate fast, as they usually do here, and with their hands. Extra food was constantly being offered and many accepted a second helping. After fifteen minutes they all got up at once, taking their plates with them. They quickly threw them in, and around, the over-filled trash cans. A few people quickly swept the area and prepared it for the next group. At the back of the temple sat another group of people, the low castes, and farther away the vegetarians. The latter were served with vegetarian food that was especially cooked for them. At around 7:30 pm the last rounds of food were served.

I saw Neel, all dressed up, who said he had just arrived and was about to wash the dishes, which was his duty for the day. “Do they do this every year?” I asked an old lady, referring to the buffalo sacrifice. “No,” she answered, “but nowadays they do it much more often than before.” Others also said that whereas in older times the ritual was performed every seven, ten or even twelve years, nowadays it is performed every two or three years. The reason for the rising frequency, many explained, is that people have become wealthier in recent years. They simply have more money so they can now afford it.

In what follows, I examine this ritual closely and analyze it within its contemporary context. I begin by providing a brief background on buffalo sacrifices in India and present the myth that often accompanies them—the myth of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī about the struggle between the great goddess Mahādevī and the buffalo demon Mahiṣāsūra. I show how both the myth and the ritual are concerned with upholding cosmic, worldly and social order and suggest that this concern can also be seen on the ground in Manali. In the following section I go on to argue that both the myth and the ritual create a discursive space for devotees to formulate and express their ideas about the

specific historic reality in which they live. I illustrate this by showing how local people's criticism of a particular phenomenon—resulting from the recent transformations that have taken place in the valley in recent years—is formulated and then acted on in association with the buffalo sacrifice. In the third section of this chapter, I examine the various ways in which the buffalo sacrifice serves as a ground for ideological struggles between various interest groups working in the region and in India at large. The struggle over the legitimacy and performance of buffalo *bali* is at one and the same time a struggle between rural and mainstream Hinduism, between local villagers and urban tourists, between animal sacrificers and vegetarians, and between tradition and modernity. It is first and foremost a struggle for identity and agency, and for the right to retain local traditions and practices in an increasingly globalizing world. In the course of explaining this I will also show how Haḍimbā's Kālī face is the one that gets foregrounded in this context.⁹⁵

Aṭhārah Bali: A (Local) History of a Ritual

Buffalo sacrifices to the goddess Haḍimbā are not new. The earliest mention of this ritual seems to occur in the *Vaṃśāvalī*. Vogel and Hutchison, whose report, as we noted earlier, is based on that text, tell us of a certain king in the early 16th century who

⁹⁵ It should be noted that Haḍimbā receives two sorts of buffalo sacrifices. One during that aṭhārah bali performed in her temple, and another one during the October Dasahra, which takes place in the town of Kullu. In this chapter I will discuss only the former, which is performed specifically for Haḍimbā and conducted by her closest devotees. The latter ritual is organized by the old royal dynasty of Kullu and is but a small part of a much larger event that involves numerous other gods and goddesses. Haḍimbā's devotees and the goddess herself, manifested in her palanquin, watch the sacrifice from hundreds of meters away and thus can hardly see a thing. Hence, this buffalo sacrifice usually gets far less attention than the one performed in her temple, which they organize by themselves and to which they have a much better access. The people I asked said that the buffalo sacrifice in the village is not performed on any fixed date but at a time that is announced by the gods through their mediums. They also said that it turns out that it is usually performed around the month of June. In 2012, however, it was performed rather unexpectedly in mid-July, following a specific incident that I describe later on in the chapter.

“had come to sacrifice a buffalo to Hirimba at Dhungri” (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 446). While we hear nothing about the nature of the event itself (except for the fact that “the animal got loose, and ran away,” with which I will deal later), we learn that the ritual was already performed at this early date. Rose’s account seems to support this dating too. Reporting on a yak sacrifice that is performed in a certain village in Lahul, Rose notes that “[t]his custom dates from the time of the Kullu Rājās who (as the god is said to be the same as that of the Dhungri temple near Manāli in Kullu) ordered that one buffalo was to be offered (as at Dhungri) every third year” (Rose 1985: Vol. III, 14). While Rose does not date the “time of the Kullu Rajas” he probably refers to the 16th century, when Bahadur Singh of Kullu had conquered large parts of Lahul (Hutchison and Vogel 1982 [1933]: 479). Recall that Bahadur Singh is the same king who constructed Haḍimbā’s temple in Dhungri.

The first reliable *historical* evidence is provided by John Calvert, whom I mentioned in the previous chapter. Calvert, who visited the Kullu Valley in 1869, happened to arrive at the temple exactly when the ritual took place. His account of the event shows that it has not changed much since:

The people having assembled from all parts of the valley and adjacent villages, dressed in their handsomest dresses and jewels, some of which are of no mean value, the headmen and priests assembled in front of the temple amid the shouts of the people, the bellowing of trumpets and horns, the shrill screech of the pipe, and the beating of drums and cymbals...the priests sat down on the stone-paved ground, and began chanting and jabbering some invocation to the Devil God [Haḍimbā]... Suddenly they all let their long hair fall loose and shook it over their faces, and swung their heads round and round, giving them a most demoniacal expression. Presently the buffalo was brought up, and I left the place. As I descended the hill I heard the repeated *thuds* of the heavy cutlass and other weapons on the devoted buffalo, who was eventually ‘hacked to pieces’ (Calvert 1873: 40-41).

Calvert was appalled by what he saw and very critical of the event. He tells us that one “Eurasian,” who had stayed behind and watched the sacrifice itself, “nearly fainted from the sickness at the sight before he could manage to extricate himself from the crowd, the whole place flowing with blood” (Calvert 1873: 41). Calvert protests the fact that while such a ritual is legal—“protected by a special clause in the Penal Code that permits the public exhibition of statues, carving, or pictures, of the most libidinous kind, provided they are connected with some religious temple or worship” (Calvert 1873: 40)—he himself would be “threatened with the vengeance of Government” if he dared “to kill a beef at Christmas!” (Calvert 1873: 41). And yet this Christian British traveler was fascinated enough with the event that he took the time to paint it. His painting is one of the earliest visual representations of the temple we possess.



Figure 8: “Sacrifice at Dungee Temple.” Painting by John Calvert. (Calvert 1873: Between pages 40 and 41).

As disturbing as such an event might have been to some, there are several indications that it was *not* the most unsettling of all the sacrifices that were used to be offered to the goddess Haḍimbā. A few village women, running a small chai and omelets stall near the staircase leading to the temple, explained:

Woman: In the past they used to sacrifice to her [to Haḍimbā] during the Daśahrā. Why don't they talk about it openly? Why don't they make this thing open? Because giving [the *bali*] is necessary.

Udi: What sacrifice? What do they sacrifice?

Woman: A human being (*insān kā bali*).... There is a cave where they celebrate the Daśahrā, in his house.

Udi: Whose house? The king's?

Woman: Yes, in the house of the king. There is an underground [cave] there. Nobody can go inside. When that place is opened, then they sacrifice [the human being]. This is because it is necessary to give it [to Haḍimbā] (Village woman, chai shop near Haḍimbā temple, April 1, 2011, note i).

Harcourt also believed that Haḍimbā used to receive human sacrifice. His evidence comes not from the king's palace in Kullu but directly from the temple in Dhungri: "In the interior there are large rocks, and a rope hangs from the roof, to which legends have it human victims were, in old times, suspended by the hands after death, and swung to and fro over the goddess." (Harcourt 1871: 325). Shastri too argues that human sacrifice used to be made in this temple "within the living memory of the people" (Shastri 1907-8: 267).⁹⁶ The rope, we should note, is no longer there, but the memories are still alive. Khimraj shared a rather less well known story he said he had heard from a certain knowledgeable old man, which reveals how human sacrifice eventually came to an end:

Khimraj: How was the human sacrifice to Haḍimbā ended? In earlier times, Haḍimbā used to receive human sacrifice.

Friend: Yes. One person was necessary

Khimraj: Haḍimbā was the sister of Haḍimb, and she had this boon (*vardān*) that she would marry the person who would kill him. In the Mahābhārata, the five

⁹⁶ It is quite possible, however, that Shastri draws this conclusion from Harcourt's observation.

Pāṇḍavas came here, to this side, the side of the Himalaya. And they met Haḍimbā. And then Bhīm killed Haḍimb. If [Haḍimbā and Bhīm] had or hadn't had sex—this I don't know—but a son was produced and the Pāṇḍavas left. Then Bhīm came here again, to the Himalaya. And then he met Ghaṭotkaca, who was very strong [*balśālī*, *śaktiśālī*]. He [Ghaṭotkaca] grabbed Bhim and brought him to Haḍimbā for sacrifice. He did not know that this was his father. If he had known, he wouldn't have brought him. But he did take him. Yet Bhīm knew. He knew that this was his son. He thought 'where is he taking me?' But Bhīm was more powerful than [Ghaṭotkaca] since he was his father, no? But he went with him anyway. Then he [Ghaṭotkaca] took him into the cave [Khimraj is not clear on the exact location of the cave, but after a quick discussion among the people it turns out that it was either in, or under, Haḍimbā's current temple]. So he took him to the *mātā*'s main place. When she saw them, [Haḍimbā] told [Ghaṭotkaca] 'today you have brought your father!' So there was a scene - and this and that. And then Bhīm said: 'after today, you shouldn't receive human sacrifice anymore. Instead, an '*aṭhārah bali*' [eighteen-fold sacrifice] will be offered to you from now on. [This is an offering] of animals, such as buffalo, sheep, fish, etc. Many things. Eighteen things. After today, human sacrifice should not be offered here.' Then she [Haḍimbā], having heard her husband's [words], said 'ok'. She said 'I will perform penance [*tapasyā*] and will become a goddess' Since then, human sacrifice has ended (Khimraj, chai shop near Haḍimbā temple, January 17, 2011, note 2).

It is hard to say whether human sacrifice to Haḍimbā is a historical fact or, rather, a metaphor for her demonic and violent nature. References to this act are occasionally made by devotees, though some reject them as untrue. It seems that in either case associating Haḍimbā with human sacrifice serves as a reminder of her potential destructive power and of the need to keep her happy lest she unleashes these powers against her own people.

As noted by Khimraj, the buffalo sacrifice, which had replaced that of humans, is known in Kullu as the *aṭhārah bali* - "eighteen-fold sacrifice."⁹⁷ It includes, in addition to the buffalo, offerings of sheep, goats, one pig, a water crab, as well as coconuts and a

⁹⁷ It is sometimes also called *aṣṭāṅg bali*, which in Sanskrit would mean 'eight-limbed' or 'eight-fold sacrifice' and not eighteen. Bali (Skt. tribute, offering, gift, oblation) is used in Kullu to indicate animal sacrifice. The deity is said to either take (*bali lete hei*) or not to take (*bali nahīm lete*) these blood offerings.

pumpkin. It is clear, however, that the killing of the buffalo is taken to be the main event of the ritual, and it is this animal that is at the center of everyone's attention before, during and after the day itself. It should also be noted that according to Rose this ritual used to be performed every three years, and not every ten or twelve, as elders in contemporary Manali report. It could be, of course, that Rose's account is inaccurate and reflects an ideal rather than a reality on the ground. It could also be that in older times the rite was indeed performed triennially, but its frequency later decreased for some reason. What is quite clear, however, is that compared with the past few decades, recent years have witnessed a significant increase in the frequency of the performance of this grand sacrifice.

Upholding Order

Myth and Cosmology

While it may come as a surprise to some people, buffalo sacrifices have always been, and to a large extent still are, a fairly popular practice in many parts of India. Scholars working in contemporary India report that buffalo sacrifices are still performed today, usually in a village setting. Thus, for example, Sax describes such buffalo sacrifices in Garhwali villages (Sax 1991: 127-59); Urban tells of similar practices in the famous Kāmākhyā Devī temple in Assam (Urban 2010: 51-72); and Pandian reports a grand sacrifice of 500 buffalos that took place in 2003 in a village near the southern town of Tiruchi (Pandian 2005). Hildebeitel, who painstakingly examined how the Mahābhārata was transposed into the local tradition of the cult of Draupadī in Gingee southeast of Madras, has shown how the cult's presentations of the Mahābhārata have absorbed features of the mythology of Durgā as Mahīśāsūramardinī and of ritual buffalo sacrifices (Hildebeitel 1988: 394-435). In another publication he identifies several

fundamental features of such grand sacrifices: the buffalo is always killed through beheading, preferably in one blow (in contrast, for example, to the Vedic method of “pacifying” the sacrificial animal by strangling it to death); sacrifices of smaller animals, such as sheep and goats, often accompany the main event, and so do possession rites; the performance is most likely to take place in times of epidemic; and it always involves the participation of all the village castes (Hiltebeitel 1980: 188-200).

Apparently, then, this ritual is more or less pan-Indian, and Hiltebeitel, among others, argues that it predates Vedic culture: “the cult and mythology of the Indian water buffalo [is] a complex whose ‘Dravidian’ credentials are as impeccable as anything Indian religion affords” (Hiltebeitel 1978: 773).⁹⁸ This complex, Hiltebeitel argues, can be seen already in the famous Harappan seal that was formerly interpreted as depicting a proto-Śiva.⁹⁹ Analyzing the symbolism of both the “buffalo-goddess complex” and the “Indus Valley religion,” he concludes that the image on the seal, which probably depicts a sacrificial theme, is actually a proto-Mahiṣa—an early divine being who was both the counterpart and the victim of the goddess.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ See below for further discussion of the complex nature of the buffalo’s relationships with the goddess, in both myth and ritual, below.

⁹⁹ This famous seal from Mohenjo-Daro, which is called ‘Proto-Śiva,’ depicts what many used to see as a meditating horned figure with an erect phallus, surrounded by several animals. As the name of the seal indicates, scholars used to think that it depicts an early form of the yogic god Śiva—also known as Paśupati, or Lord of Animals—who does not appear in the Vedas. For them, this seal was thus a proof that the Indus Valley Civilization was the real source for this god.

¹⁰⁰ D.D. Kosambi was the first to raise this issue. Here is what Lorenzen writes in this regard: “Starting from the hypothesis of the archaeologist George Marshall, most scholars have accepted the identification of this figure as the precursor of the god Śiva in his Paśupati, or Lord of Animals, form. The most important dissent from this consensus was made by D. D. Kosambi, who pointed out that the horns of the figure were those of a buffalo and not of a bull (the latter being the animal most closely associated both with the Vedic Rudra and the later Śiva).” Interestingly, “Kosambi further proposed a historically improbable identification of the proto-Paśupati figure with the buffalo demon named Mahiṣāsura (which dates at least 1,500 years later) and through this demon back to Śiva. Until further evidence or an accepted reading of the Indus script becomes available, it seems best to suspend judgment on the whole problem” (Lorenzen 1987:

In Kullu, the buffalo sacrifice is often perceived as a mechanism for solving large-scale problems and upholding order. Devotees often stress that the ritual is performed for the sake of *śānti* (*sukh śānti ke liye*)—peace, tranquility, and a state of general wellbeing. They note that *śānti* is presently declining everywhere and thus badly needs to be restored. Life is so much more stressful these days, villagers complain, and people are tired and overworked. Families are falling apart and respect for the elders is on the wane. Everyone is chasing money, they lament, and social solidarity is dissolving. All this affects people’s health as well, as strange new illnesses inflict relatives and neighbors. The foods humans eat have become “chemical” and are no longer healthy and “natural” as before. Technology too is spreading sorrow and depression. “Think of how quickly you learn about the death of a distant relative,” a local priest explained. “Bad rumors travel so fast these days with these new mobile phones.” Even the weather has gone crazy. “Summer comes in winter, and winter comes in summer,” noted my landlady one day. New catastrophes hit every day: the floods in Ladak, the tsunami in the south, the earthquake and the ensuing nuclear disaster in Japan. We live in a time of rapid decline, villagers conclude, of an overall deterioration of *śānti*. Life used to be easy, explained a middle-aged villager of Old Manali; people knew what they had to do. They worked, they ate, they drank, and they went to sleep. Now, he complained, “one needs to think all the time.” “Now,” he laughed “we can’t sleep anymore.” The buffalo sacrifice is supposed to check the decline of *śānti* and of all the misfortunes that accompany it. It aims to “set things right” (*thīk karnā*), protect the region from harm, and restore a general sense of personal and social wellbeing.

8039). For other interpretations of the seal as depicting a bull-related figure, see (Srinivasan 1975). For the pre-Vedic origins of Durga’s victory over Mahiśāsura, see (Parpola 1992).

This view of the ritual fits nicely within scholarly interpretations of this violent act. Many scholars were inspired by Eliade's interpretation, according to which rituals reenact in the present archetypal models of action that had been performed by the gods in a primordial mythic time.¹⁰¹ It thereby invests particular historic realities with eternal significance and meaning (Eliade 1959: 62-73).¹⁰² The myth reenacted in the *bali*, of course, is that of Mahādevī's struggle with the buffalo demon Mahiṣāsur.

Erndl summarizes this myth as follows:

The demon Mahiṣa has usurped the powers of the gods so that they no longer receive their proper shares of the (Vedic) sacrifice, leaving them powerless to kill [him] themselves. They approach Viṣṇu and Śiva for help, and all the gods together, through their anger, emit a great brilliance (*tejas*), which fuses together "like a flaming mountain whose flames pervaded the entire sky" (*Devī Māhātmya* 2.11). This heap of brilliance becomes a beautiful woman, each part of her body formed from the brilliance of a particular god. Each god then gives her a weapon, ornament, or other emblem: Śiva gives her a trident, Kṛṣṇa a discus, Himalaya a lion as her vehicle, and so on. The goddess, her eyes burning with anger, proceeds to demolish Mahiṣa's armies, while her lion devours the dead bodies. Finally she faces Mahiṣa himself, who in the course of the battle takes on successively the forms of a buffalo, a lion, a man holding a sword, an elephant, and again a buffalo. Pausing to guzzle wine and filling the sky with her eerie laughter, the goddess places her foot on the buffalo demon's neck and pierces it with her trident. As the demon in his original form tries to emerge from the buffalo's mouth, the goddess cutoff his head with a flourish. The gods praise her lavishly in a lengthy hymn, extolling her as the supreme protector and boon giver; she has saved the world from ruin and has even been gracious to the defeated demons, who achieve a heavenly state after being purified by her weapons. The gods ask her to return whenever they remember her. She agrees and then disappears (Erndl 2004: 149).

The *locus classicus* of this myth is the *Devīmāhātmya* (glorification or greatness of the goddess) of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (chapters 81-93), which is often dated to the fourth century C.E. The *māhātmya* portion, however, was probably added only later,

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Fuller (1992: 84, 111-119).

¹⁰² I will be engaging with other prominent theorists who wrote about sacrifice in the following pages.

during the sixth century. A key Śākta scripture, the Sanskrit Devīmāhātmya “has an independent life of its own, appearing in numerous editions and serving as a mythological, theological, and ritual text among Śāktas and non-Śāktas throughout India” (Erndl 2004: 147). The product of an early Sanskritization process, during which earlier goddess cults were synthesized together with Vedic ideas, the text perceives the ultimate reality in the universe to be feminine. It is the first systematic articulation of the image of Mahādevī—the Great Goddess of the Hindu tradition—as the “supreme being who creates, preserves, and destroys the universe” (Erndl 2004: 147).¹⁰³ The struggle with Mahiṣa constitutes the second of three episodes in which the goddess is involved in defeating all sorts of threatening demonic powers.

The battle between the Devī and Mahiṣa is often understood as an eternal struggle against disorder. Mahiṣa, who takes over the world of the gods, thereby disrupting the inner balance of the universe, is a symbol of the chaos that always threatens the cosmic order.¹⁰⁴ It is not a coincidence that the Devī is created from particles originating from all the gods, a process that echoes the creation of the king as reported in the Laws of Manu (Coburn 1996: 37-38). Like the king—the paradigm for law and order and the prime supporter of dharma in the world of humans—the Devī is a divine queen whose *raison d'être* is to reestablish dharma. She kills Mahiṣa, the ultimate personification of chaos.

¹⁰³ See also Coburn (1996, 1991).

¹⁰⁴ Fuller states this explicitly: “Mahishasura is the king of the demons (*asura*), who represent the forces of ignorance and chaos” (Fuller 1992: 108). Relating to the appearance of a “stranger buffalo” in an episode in the Vāmana Purāṇa, which anticipates this aspect in Mahiṣa’s character, Berkson writes the following: “The fearless Asiatic savage buffalo who approaches domestic buffalo cows for mating is evoked here, introduced as the terrifying aspect of the primeval buffalo. The *bubalis/bubalus*, the heaviest and longest-horned animals in the world today, are a potent symbol of chaos and disorder” (Berkson 1995: 45).

This interpretation of the myth, combined with the fact that the buffalo sacrifice was often performed in royal setting, must have propelled the Eliaden interpretations noted above. In this view, the ritual reenactment of the mythical slaughtering of the demon by the goddess marks the reinstatement of dharma and the triumph of the forces of order and stability over the forces of ignorance and chaos. It is thus hardly surprising that both this myth and its ritual reenactment are often associated with the Durgā Pūjā, a festival that “clearly asserts Durgā’s central role as a battle queen and the regulator of the cosmos” (Kinsley 1987: 106). The same logic explains why both the Durgā festival and the buffalo sacrifice—those that accompany the *pūjā* and those that are performed separately—took place in royal settings where the king, or one of his servants, killed the beast. The mythical slaying of the demon by the goddess, and the accompanying real slaughter of the buffalo by the king, marked a triumph of order over chaos, and the restoration of *dharma* over *adharma*.¹⁰⁵

J.Z. Smith’s observation about the meaning of hunting in agricultural societies also sheds light on the logic behind this ritual killing:

[W]ithin agricultural, urban societies, the religious symbolism of hunting is that of overcoming the beast who frequently represents either chaos or death. The hunt is perceived, depending on the symbolic system, as a battle between creation and chaos, good and evil, life and death, man and nature, the civil and the uncivil. The paradigm of such a symbolic understanding is the royal hunt which persists from ancient Sumer and Egypt to the contemporary queen of England, mythologized in legends of heroic combats with dragons, and partially secularized in the relatively recent ceremony of the Spanish bullfight. The king, as representative of both the ruling god and the people, slays the beast” (Smith 1980: 118).

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Kinsley (1987: 95-115) on the Durgā Pūjā; and Fuller (1992: 106-27) on rituals of kingship. In Manali, the king can, but does not have to be present during this ritual. He does, however, sponsor the buffalo sacrifice to Haḍimbā during the annual Daśahrā festival in Kullu town.

In this reading, the ritual killing of the buffalo is a tour-de-force of both the goddess and the king and a display of the triumph of order over disorder, cosmos over chaos, and dharma over *adharma*.

A different, though somewhat related interpretation of the ritual sees it as connected with agricultural fertility rites that sought to nourish and reinvigorate the land with the blood of the sacrificed beast. Here too, the goal is to uphold the natural order, but the way it is achieved is understood differently. Writing on animal sacrifices that accompany the Durgā Pūjā and on buffalo sacrifices in particular, Kinsley observes the following in this regard:

My suggestion is that underlying blood sacrifices to Durgā is the perception, perhaps only unconscious, that this great goddess who nourishes the crops and is identified with the power underlying all life needs to be reinvigorated from time to time. Despite her great powers she is capable of being exhausted through continuous birth and the giving of nourishment. To replenish her powers, to reinvigorate her, she is given back life in the form of animal sacrifices. The blood in effect resupplies her so that she may continue to give life in return. Having harvested the crops, having literally reaped the life-giving benefits of Durgā's potency, it is appropriate (perhaps necessary) to return strength and power to her in the form of the blood of sacrificial victims. This logic, and the association of blood sacrifices with harvest, is not at all uncommon in the world's religions. It is a typical ceremonial scenario in many cultures, and it seems likely that at one time it was important in the celebration of Durgā Pūjā (Kinsley 1987: 112)¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Additional interpretations of the ritual include the following: Drawing on the symbolism of the sami tree, whose presence she identifies in different cultural settings, Biardeau points to the close associations existing between the Mahābhārata war, the *Devī Māhātmya* and buffalo sacrifices all over India. She concludes that the same rationale that motivates the Vedic sacrifice underlies these different cultural instances. The demon slain by the goddess in the myth; the buffalo sacrificed during the ritual; and the enemies killed in the Mahābhārata war—all serve as a substitution for the Self in a sacrificial process that is necessary for the restoration of dharma and order (Biardeau 1984). Sax, who also sees this ritual as a mechanism for establishing order, notes in passim the low economic value of buffalos in Uttarakhand, thus adding a materialist perspective to the issue. In contrast to the cow, which according to Marvin Harris' famous cultural materialist analysis is sacred due to her high value in the Indian agricultural economy, the buffalo's *low* value makes it a perfect candidate for this sacrifice (Sax 1991: 140). Volchok, to take a final example, combines a similar ecological interpretation with a symbolic one. The buffalo sacrifice, he reminds us, often takes place on Vijayādaṣamī (another name for the Daśahrā festival), which is celebrated towards the end of the rainy season "when the crop is fully ripe and ready for harvesting." It is thus a

The myth of the Devī's struggle with the buffalo demon was usually *not* suggested by Haḍimbā's devotees as the reason behind the performance of the sacrifice. Raman Sharma, one of Haḍimbā *pujārīs*, did recall that a certain devotee used to recite the *Devī Māhātmya* in the temple, but he does not do so anymore. In any case, Raman did not associate this recitation with the performance of the buffalo *bali*.

And yet there are several indications that the association between the myth and the ritual is not lost on Haḍimbā's devotees. First, whereas today, Haḍimbā's main manifestation in her temple is in the form of a pair of feet carved in rock, it seems that this is a rather late addition. Aynsley, who in 1879 got a chance to peek into the cave ("a large hollow") where the feet are now carved, did not mention them at all. She does mention, however, that "in one corner of this [cave] was placed a small brass four-armed idol, which the attendant priest named Hurimba" (Murray-Aynsley 1879: 282). By this, Aynsley probably referred to a small statue of Durgā Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī, which is now brought into the temple only for the morning pūjā and then taken back to the *pujārīs'* house for fear it will be stolen. This statue was still kept in the temple in 1963, as reported by Chetwode: "the only idols in the Dughri temple are two small brass images of Durga with whom Hidimba has inevitably become identified—killing the buffalo demon, and a carving in dark grey stone of the same subject" (Chetwode 1989: 173-74). The dark stone is still there, situated at the back of the temple. It is worshiped daily by the *pujārīs*, even if only occasionally by the other visitors. The priests are perfectly aware of the identity of the goddess engraved on the stone and present it to inquisitive tourists as

festival to the goddess of fertility in which the sacrifice of the buffalo, which poses great danger to the harvest, makes perfect practical as well as symbolic sense (Volchok 1973).

Durgā, the Slayer-of-Mahiṣa, and as one of Haḍimbā's many forms. Another such image is also engraved on the temple's exterior wooden façade.

Second, while not too often, devotees occasionally mentioned the myth as the reason behind the performance of the sacrifice. In fact, when they did so, they made this explanation sound so obvious that I began to suspect that the reason it was *not* usually mentioned to me was that everyone expected I must be aware of this story. Here is, for example, how Shamlal, one of Haḍimbā's priests, responded to my question:

Udi: But why buffalo?

Shamlal: He was a *rākṣiś* [*rākṣasa*], no? This is why [she] killed him.

Udi: Who?

Shamlal: The goddess. Durgā. We call her Mahiṣāsuramardinī. The one who killed Mahiṣāsur. The statue at the back - this is Mahiṣāsuramardinī. She killed Mahiṣāsur, and this is why we do this sacrifice.¹⁰⁷

Interestingly, another reason provided by Shamlal for the choosing of the buffalo as the sacrificial animal was that it is a powerful and fearless animal, which does not shy away from attacking even lions. He admitted he had recently learned about this fact when watching a nature program on TV.

Finally, as it turns out, immediately following the beheading of the buffalo, a pig is placed on its dead body and sacrificed as well. The reason for this, several devotees explained, is that together they form a 'Mahiṣāsur'—'mahiṣa' being the Sanskrit and Kulluvi for a buffalo, and 'sūar' the Hindi for pig. Whereas in the original Sanskrit, Mahiṣāsur is formed by compounding 'Mahiṣa' (buffalo) and 'asur' (demon) rather than 'sūar', the very reference made here to the name of this mythic figure reveals that participants are very much aware of the association of the ritual with the famous myth. In either case, and whether the ritual is explicitly associated in Kullu with the

¹⁰⁷ Shamlal and Dhamodar Das, Haḍimbā temple, April 1, 2011, note f.

Mahiṣāsuramardinī myth or not, what remains clear is that for locals it functions as a mechanism for upholding order and for checking the advance of destabilizing forces, as they themselves explain.

Community and Caste

A particularly common complaint raised by devotees, which is often associated in people's explanations with the receding *śānti*, concerns the rapid decline of social solidarity and the sense of unity in the village. Khimraj, for example, lamented how festivals, previously celebrated as occasions for strengthening social ties and relationships, are quickly losing this character as people get “busier” chasing money:

Khimraj: Listen brother, today people are only after work. They are busy. They are looking for money. [They think:] ‘Where can I get some money?’ It wasn't like that in older times. Previously, people didn't think this way. In the past, people thought differently. They thought how to meet each other, to seat with each other. They used to invite people properly [proper invite karte the—to invite people over during festivals and other village occasions]. Now it is not like that anymore.

Udi: How so?

Khimraj: Now, I go out to do guiding [during the time of the festival—Khimraj is a tour guide]. I'm thinking “if someone comes, then someone comes. If he leaves, then he leaves...” (he laughs, a little embarrassed). Previously it wasn't like that. One *had* to sit [and wait for the guests]. You could be sure that someone would come. Some relative, for sure. You had to prepare dry meat.

Someone: Nowadays, everyone is caught in this circle of money. Money comes from here, money comes from there

Khimraj: They also forget about the *devtās* [gods]. See the number of people traveling with the *mātā* these days. I know, I see. How different it is now. Very big difference [i.e. participation is dropping]. Today people are mostly busy. Just see how it is when the [tourist] season starts in Manali. *All* the people are busy. If a festival is coming, or another occasion is coming, people don't care. One sits in the internet [place]. Someone else sits in his office. A third one is counting money. It wasn't like this before. Before, people met with each other, sat with each other. There was complete unity. People used to stick to one another.

Throughout my time in Kullu, locals kept complaining about the growing alienation and the decline of social solidarity in the village. While one should definitely suspect that a certain degree of nostalgia is at work in people's reports, one does get the impression that elders in the region grew up in a community where interpersonal relations and the sense of communal belonging were much more intense than today. The fact that the growing feeling of alienation is associated with the recent decline of *śānti*, and that the buffalo sacrifice aims to overturn this process, suggests that locals see this ritual as capable of upholding the old social order and retaining the sense of solidarity among the villagers.

Interestingly, both the ritual and the myth accompanying it are often understood in India as marking an attempt to restore a breached social order. Many versions of the story carry sexual overtones and involve immoral conduct on the part of both the demon and the goddess, which severely threatens social norms and institutions. In South India, for example, the myth displays fears of female sexuality and the need to tame it so it can become productive rather than destructive. The virgin goddess, whose sexuality is unrestrained and dangerous, needs to be subdued to enable the transformation of the malevolent goddess into a benevolent wife and mother. Mahiṣa's struggle with the goddess is, in fact, an example of a rather unsuccessful attempt to do so. The buffalo demon fails to subdue the goddess and is therefore crushed by her dangerous powers. Śiva, on the other hand, is much more successful at taming the goddess' predatory virgin sexuality, thereby transforming her femininity into a socially desired one.¹⁰⁸ Similar attempts to tame and transform female sexuality can be seen in rituals as well. Kālī's

¹⁰⁸ “[I]t is the virgin goddess who is the true siren, seductive, powerful, dangerous. The god who desires her must face the threat of death at her hands; in the end, either he dies—as in the myth of Mahiṣa and in several of the folk variants from other shrines—or he tames his fearful bride” (Shulman 1976: 133).

fight with an earlier rival—Raktabīja—is reenacted in the performance of the Muttiyetu ritual in Kerala. As shown by Caldwell, by the end of the nightly performance, the dangerous divine virgin is transformed into a benevolent mother (Caldwell 1999: 104-54).

In North India, the themes are somewhat different, but the social message remains the same. Sax presents us with the myth of Nandadevi, showing how the buffalo plays the role of a sexual aggressor who was brought to life by the goddess' own improper social behavior. Nandadevi defies her husband's authority, breaches norms of purity and pollution and improperly adopts a young buffalo calf. As a result, she is attacked by her adopted son, Mekhāsūr, who demonstrates illicit sexual desires towards his adopting mother. In the ritual reenactment of this myth in the Garhwal, the buffalo is supposedly made to believe that he is about to marry the goddess before he is slain. When this sexual aggressor finally lies dead, both in myth and ritual, the goddess can finally turn back to being a benevolent wife. Thus, both in the south and north of India, the myth of the goddess' battle with Mahiṣa reveals an underlying social fear of uncontrolled female sexuality that poses grave danger to social norms and order. It is only after the buffalo is slain that proper sexuality can be restored and with it the proper structure of the family - the fundamental unit of the larger social order. In Kullu, related grievances concerning the growing disintegration of the family unit are not uncommon. Yet the buffalo sacrifice to the goddess Haḍimbā seems to address other, more pressing aspects of the shaken social order.

Early social functionalist theories of ritual pointed to the maintenance of social unity as its main role. Such theories, which were quite popular up until the 1970s, have been much criticized since, for two main reasons: (1) They ignored the inner conflicts

and lack of unity that exist in every society; (2) They reduced ritual to its social function while ignoring its cognitive, psychological and embodied aspects, as well as its role in the production and transmission of symbols and meaning.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, and despite its many problems, it is my view that the social functionalist perspective still has some value in shedding light on certain aspects of ritual action in Kullu. I will dedicate the following pages to demonstrating this.

Durkheim's ideas about the way in which ritual in general, and sacrifice in particular, functions to uphold social unity are well known. Durkheim studied the aboriginal people of Australia, describing their religious traditions as totemism—the totem being an animal or a plant that is a sacred symbol of the clan and the centerpiece of its rituals. The communal worship of the totem, and its subsequent consumption by the members of the group, has, according to Durkheim, a powerful emotional effect on individuals. The exuberant and ecstatic experience, which involves losing an individual sense of self combined with a strong feeling of commitment towards the totem, leads members to identify with the group for which the totem serves as a symbol. Thus, the sacrificial ritual provides an occasion for a strong, socially unifying experience with a powerful cohesive effect.

Indeed, one can criticize Durkheimian for reducing ritual to function of maintaining social unity. Yet this function can indeed be shown to exist in contemporary villages of the Himalaya, which until very recently formed relatively secluded communities.¹¹⁰ William Sax, for example, a neo-Durkheimian who dedicates much of

¹⁰⁹ For a good summary of this issue, see Bell (1997: 24-29)

¹¹⁰ This is not to say that villages did not have contact with each other or that villagers lived in closed communities isolated from the outside world. As Chetan Singh shows, although historically regions in Himachal were quite distinct, their residents did interact with each other on all sorts of levels (Singh 1998).

his work to showing how ritual is a ground for social conflict rather than unity (Sax 1991: 127-59), does not shy away from pointing out the socially integrative aspects of ritual when he encounters them. Thus, in an example that is highly relevant to our own discussion, Sax describes the unifying aspects of a buffalo sacrifice performed in a village in the Garhwal. Prior to the event, the buffalo is made to spend one year in the village, at the end of which he is led along the village borders, thus carefully circumambulating it and marking out its territory. The ritual itself, Sax stresses, is a collective affair involving all the village groups:

By collectively purchasing and bringing the buffalo, providing the materials for the *yantra* [which is painted on the ground and over which the buffalo is sacrificed], and making a pilgrimage to the place of the sacrifice, the villagers of Kamati constituted themselves as a totality. This was the pattern in all of the buffalo sacrifices that I witnessed (Sax 1991: 146).

Several aspects of the buffalo sacrifice to the goddess Haḍimbā seem to have a similar socially unifying effect. First, the whole event, which is quite expensive in local terms due to the high cost of the buffalo and the large quantities of food served, is financed by all members of the community. Appointed committee members—called just that, “members”—visit every household in both Old Manali and Dhungri prior to the sacrifice and collect a fixed sum from each (about rs.100-150). Names are taken down on a sheet of paper, receipts are produced in return for the payment, and the collectors move on to the next house. While one can contribute a larger sum if one chooses, villagers are obliged to pay at least the minimum fee. During my stay in the village, I came across only one person who admitted he refused to pay, objecting to the violent ceremony on an ideological basis. While he did not think that he would be *forced* to pay the sum, he did

At the same time, the mountainous topography of the region, and the small number of roads, made travel and movement in the area quite challenging for the common person.

clarify that his action was quite unusual and that others, who fear the social pressure of becoming the subject of negative gossip, pay the fees even if they do not approve of or want to take part in the event.

A second and important unity-creating aspect of the ritual is the level of participation it requires from many families in the village. The elaborate nature of this day-long festival demands an exceptional number of “duties” to be carried out in order for it to work properly. The division of labor is determined in advance by Tirthram—Haḍimbā’s *kārdār* from Old Manali—who prepares a long list of tasks, which he then delegates to different households in the village. The latter then appoint one or two representatives from the household to perform these tasks. The duties involved include, for example, purchasing a food supply in the market beforehand and then cutting, cooking and serving it during the feast itself. In addition, pots and other utensils need to be brought from the storehouse, washed, distributed, and then cleaned before they are stored back again. Representatives are sent to invite other deities in the vicinity to participate in the event; others are sent to purchase, bring and then take care of the buffalo; and yet others are in charge of supervising the progression of the day and making sure that everything works according to plan. Several individuals are chosen for sacrificing the sheep and the other offerings to the goddess, and one person is selected to kill the buffalo. In addition, there are the other, more ‘ordinary’ tasks that often accompany local festivals: assembling the goddess’ palanquin in Old Manali; carrying it over to her temple in Dhungri while accompanying the procession with music; channeling the gods by the mediums and performing the accompanying *pūjās* by the *pujārīs*. On the day of the event Tirthram posts the list of duties, along with the names of the people assigned to perform them, on the wall of the storage room next to the temple.

In 2009 I counted ten pages with at least two hundred names. Considering the fact that the combined population of Old Manali and Dhungri, including young children and babies, does not exceed 2000, this number means that almost every household in the village sends at least one person to participate actively in the event and to collaborate closely with others towards its successful performance.

Durkheim's work has informed the writings of many scholars who, while criticizing some aspects of his theory, generally embraced the idea that ritual serves the function of upholding social unity. Thus, for example, Rene Girard saw ritual—as well as other human institutions—as founded in primal violence. Sacrifice, he argued, is a mechanism where the inherent destructive desires and violence of a community are transferred onto another, a scapegoat that is made into an Other. The killing of the victim enables the repression of such desires, and is ultimately a condition for human solidarity. Thus, and in contrast to Durkheim, “Girard argues that the group becomes conscious of itself as a group in relationship to the sacrificed totem victim not by means of identification with it but by contrast to it as ‘other’” (Bell 1997: 16).

This effect can also be seen in the Manali ritual. During the intense moments of the sacrifice itself, there are several indications that a sense of comradeship is developed among participants. People are squeezed together in the main temple ground, literally rubbing shoulders with one another in an attempt to get a better view of what is going on. In contrast to what one may expect, devotees are not struggling with each other for place but help one another to better position themselves and find a better place to stand.¹¹¹

When the buffalo is led in, it is tied with ropes pulled by dozens of male devotees who

¹¹¹ Women and girls, for example, help each other climb on the temple balcony where many of them stand. Young boys help one another climb the roof of the storage room, where I myself was sitting during the ritual of 2009.

collaborate in leading him to its place and making sure it does not get out of control. Then, when the sacrificer lands the blows on the buffalo's neck, the crowd joins in counting the strikes together in one big chorus. After the buffalo is killed, the people—cheering with joy and laughing with relief—shake each other's hands and congratulate one another for the successful completion of the sacrifice. While I do not mean to argue that the whole village becomes 'one big happy family' during or after the event, I do feel we should at least acknowledge the brief moments when one can experience a sort of unmediated human bond created when facing the struggling, raging buffalo.

It is important to note that the struggle between the people and the beast is not only a symbolic or theatrical one, but at times, very real. The idea of the struggle, we should recall, is central to the myth as well. Whereas the Devī defeats the buffalo demon in the end, a great deal of the story is dedicated to narrating the course of their battle. Mahiṣa is not easily overcome, and he keeps changing his form throughout the fight. He employs all kinds of tricks in his attempt to overcome the goddess. The situation on the ground appears quite similar. Devotees' accounts of the sacrifice indicate that this is no ordinary feat. Whereas in more common sacrifice, the chicken, goat, or sheep, do not stand any real chance against their sacrificers, when it comes to the buffalo the situation is different. I spent hours in conversations with Neel, discussing how different beheading a buffalo is from sacrificing a sheep or a goat. With glittering eyes he explained how the skills and strength required, the technique involved and the risks taken were all of a totally different scale. A poor positioning of the body vis-à-vis the buffalo, a wrong angle of the blade, or misjudgment about the right moment for leveling the blow, all these could have dire consequences and result in a wounded and raging buffalo cut loose and running frantically around. Other people revealed similar sentiments. Recall the devotee I

cited earlier who admitted that the sacrificer had to have a “strong heart” in order to accomplish the task. The centrality of the struggle to the whole event was signaled also by villagers’ great concern with the size of the buffalo. “Is it big?” they kept asking each other before the event. A small buffalo would be a disappointment, since killing it was not as challenging. A large beast, on the other hand, posed a real threat and hence offered a promise for a real fight and a captivating spectacle.

This, in fact, was exactly what happened in 2011, when the buffalo was exceptionally large. As it turned out, the first blow was poorly aimed and instead of making the buffalo collapse, it merely wounded its shoulder, while at the same time unintentionally cutting two of the three ropes holding it. The buffalo, severely hurt yet still on its feet, was now held by only one rope and by a mere third of the people who originally controlled him. It was only the bravery and calmness of the sacrificer—a military soldier on vacation—that enabled him to reposition himself and administer a second, this time deadly blow. The buffalo was eventually beheaded and dropped dead in front of the temple. But for a few moments, the struggle was just that—a true struggle.

Interestingly, legends in Kullu also indicate that the buffalo does stand some chance and that the ritual is somewhat open-ended, and not just a scripted theatrical performance. We may recall the story by Hutchison and Vogel quoted above, about the buffalo that managed to escape the sacrificial ground. Similar incidents can also be found in living memory. While discussing the 2011 incident described above with one of Haḍimbā’s *pujārīs* he said that in the end, the buffalo is always killed and cannot really escape the arena. He assured me that this could never happen. At this point his father intervened. It can, and it did, he said. The buffalo once ran away and escaped. “So what did you do?” I asked. “We ended up shooting it,” he said “with a gun.”

The sense of unity produced in the ritual seems to exceed the boundaries of the village. Several delegations arrive from the surrounding villages to participate in the sacrifice, comprising of gods, people and sheep. The deities in this case are represented by their *ghanṭī dorj* (bell and censer) and human mediums, who, as often happens in other occasions in the Kullu Valley, dance with each other while holding hands, interlacing their fingers and hugging each other in choreographed moves. It is easy to see how this dance functions as an embodied display of affinity between both the deities and the communities they represent. While there could be, of course, other ways to interpret these gestures, having witnessed other forms of ritual encounters in the Kullu Valley, where similar gestures of affinity were displayed between the physical manifestations of the gods, I am quite positive that this interpretation is valid.¹¹²

Yet despite all such displays of affinity and integration, the unity that is created is far from complete. First, while women participate in the ritual both as helpers and viewers, they do so in much smaller numbers and their presence in the ritual is not as extensive as that of men. Second, many villagers are not present in the ritual at all. While almost everyone arrives at some point to participate in the communal meal, many are absent from the ritual itself for various mundane reasons (work, travel, etc.). Third, since the buffalo sacrifice is often performed in the month of June, which is the height of the tourist season, many domestic and foreign visitors are present in the arena as well. One

¹¹² It should be mentioned that villagers themselves did not offer this interpretation. In fact, they hardly ever offered a verbal interpretation of *any* of the elements comprising their rituals. They would often simply dismiss the question saying that this is the age-old custom and the ways things have always been done. Anne Feldhaus reminds us that “‘folk-religion,’ in the words of Günther Sontheimer, ‘does not explain itself.’ It is lived, experienced, it consists more in actions than in words. Verbal articulations, when obligingly thought up in answer to an outsider’s questions, tend to sound thin, or far-fetched, or ad hoc” (Feldhaus 1995: 12). At the same time, devotees often explain that the *devī devtā* meet each other just as human friends do and point to different behaviors of their palanquins as markers of joy and bonding. I think, therefore, that it is safe to assume that the human affection displayed in the *gurs*’ dance is meant to communicate the intimate relationships existing between the channeled gods.

would be hard-pressed to show how exactly these random tourists fit into the display and production of local village unity. Furthermore, and as we will see later, the tourists' presence in the ritual can often cause tensions and result in visible displays of opposition between them and the locals. Finally, what mostly undermines the production of real social unity is the fact that divisions within the community are not only well kept throughout the ritual, but, to a large extent, are reproduced and maintained by it as well. The caste system is the case in point.

Criticizing the Durkheimian model for assuming that ritual maintains the social order by reaffirming already existing sentiments, Radcliffe-Brown suggested that the ritual was actually *producing* such sentiments, and that it was exactly this production that made ritual indispensable to maintaining social order. Radcliffe-Brown also argued that the ritual was central to creating distinct group identities within the larger community, which operated together in organic solidarity. Thus, while still within the realm of social functionalism, Radcliffe-Brown did offer a more nuanced and political understanding of the function of ritual.

In his introduction to *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*—the famous study of his well-known Indian student Srinivas—Radcliffe-Brown writes the following on village rituals in India:

[T]hough the whole village community takes part in the ceremonies, different caste groups have different parts to play and are thus differentiated. Some, for example, take part in the animal sacrifice, while others have nothing to do with it. Thus a caste group within the village is able, within the cult, to establish its own unity and its separation from other groups. This is a significant feature of the caste structure of the village (Srinivas 1952: vii).

Radcliffe-Brown's observation fits nicely with what I witnessed during the buffalo sacrifice in Dhungri. Here too, one could see how social divisions were kept,

most conspicuously between the higher and lower castes. Like everywhere else in India, the caste system in the Kullu Valley is rather complex, comprising various social groups that follow a large number of intricate customs that orient their mutual relationships and determine their relative status. Pandits, Acharyas, Thakurs, Tahwis, Lohars, Kolis and Naurs are the main, though not only, caste groups that one finds here. Whereas their relative statuses are both displayed and produced in a series of rules—concerning marriage ties; exchange of food, water and milk; temple entrance and movement in certain spaces—the most visible display of caste hierarchies takes place during public communal meals. Whether in weddings, festivals, funerals or buffalo sacrifices, seating arrangements are predicated on caste affiliations. Here, the division becomes rather simple. There are the high-caste people—usually Thakurs, who are the largest social group in the area—and the low-caste people—basically, all the rest—who sit and eat separately.¹¹³ Depending on the occasion and on the setting where the meal is served, the separation takes either spatial or temporal form. The groups may sit in different parts of the same ground, on different platforms, or in different rooms or halls. If the space does not allow for such arrangements, the separation will turn temporal. One group will eat first whereas the second will eat later. Unsurprisingly, the higher caste people will almost always get the better half. They will sit closer to the temple, higher on the platform or before the others. In either case, the separation is clear and the marking of one's caste in these public events is highly visible and almost unavoidable.¹¹⁴ The cooking area, run

¹¹³ Whereas everyday restrictions on the sharing of food mark the boundaries between a number of different caste groups, during public events the division is usually binary in nature. It turns into a triple division if pundits or other high-caste people are present. This, however, does not happen often due to the limited number of such people in the Manali area.

¹¹⁴ It should be mentioned that sometimes when pundits or other high-caste Brahmins participate in such public meals, they will sit in yet a third area, kept only for them. However, and given the relative small

exclusively by higher-caste people, is also off-limits for the low-caste people and thus marks them as such by restricting their movement in the ritual space.

Stricter separation customs, which used to be practiced in the past, are sometimes reported by people in the village. Thus, for example, a higher caste woman explained that lower-caste people used to move aside and clear the road when they saw an upper-caste person walking by, so they would not accidentally touch him. But today, the person lamented, it is the other way around: low castes feel so empowered by the new government rules against caste discrimination that they no longer bother to move. The upper-caste pundit needs to move aside himself, because if he is touched, he would have to undergo all sorts of purification rituals. I suspect that this young woman (in her twenties) has not really witnessed such a strict reality of untouchability in her life. It seems likely that she has learned about such past realities in school or picked it up from stories. But her account did convey a feeling widely shared by contemporary upper-caste villagers, that in recent years the caste system has been alarmingly shaken and that lower-caste people have gained much power in recent years.¹¹⁵

This is probably right. Prior to the reforms of the 1950s, much of the land in H.P. was held either by temple deities or by other large landowners. In 1948, for example,

number of such Brahmins in the valley, this does not happen much, and when it does, it is hardly noticeable due to the small size of their group. In addition, there are many other restrictions put on sharing food, or sharing space while having food, between certain groups. However, such restrictions are often displayed in smaller settings and are relaxed and become rather binary when it comes to large communal feasts.

¹¹⁵ Temple-entrance restrictions, for example, which used to be kept here, as well as restrictions on access to water and wells, are no longer permitted by law. Interestingly, however, people of the older generation still avoid enjoying some of these rights. Old habits die hard, and in this case, where the restrictions are perceived by many to have divine sanction, they die even harder. Haḍimbā's *gur*, for example, who is of a very low caste, does not enter the goddess' temple but sits on its balcony outside.

Haḍimbā's temple held 309 *bīghās* of land (Elmore 2005: 237).¹¹⁶ Elmore nicely analyzes the sociopolitical and economic outcomes of the land reforms and shows how they strengthened the state and the orchard owners at the expense of the local temples and deities. Many in Manali today still remember a time when the goddess Haḍimbā was the actual owner of the land. Almost all of the people who now perform services at the temple—musicians, carpenters, and even the *pujārīs*—often explain that these services are done in return for the land granted to their families by the goddess in earlier times. While the services remain, the actual ownership of the land has been transferred to the cultivators themselves. These new land rights have elevated the status of low-caste people, who became the legal owners of plots whose value has increased significantly due to tourism and its demand for land.

Urbanization too, which turned Manali from a small market area into a bustling Himalayan town, has played an important role in this regard. In contrast to the village setting, where everyone knows everyone, in the town it is much harder to identify the caste affiliation of a person. In small restaurants, for example, where, for lack of space, diners may need to share a table with strangers whose caste they cannot tell, maintaining formal caste-based seating arrangements becomes much harder. State laws too strictly forbid any sort of caste discrimination. A famous incident took place in the valley a few years ago, which left a huge impression on villagers. A low-caste person of the Koli caste went for a morning prayer in the temple at Vashisht village and was humiliated by an upper-caste man who called him names and ordered him to leave the place. The aggrieved man filed a complaint with the police, who quickly arrested the high-caste

¹¹⁶ Bīghā is a highly variable measure. It may vary between 1/3 and 1 acre, but it can sometimes even be as large as 5. See Elmore (2005: 267 footnote 99).

person. This incident has spread fear among higher-caste people, who are now much more careful in how they treat, or even call, the lower caste people. “Since then,” a low-caste person reported, “no one dares to even talk about caste, at least not in the open.”¹¹⁷ This incident has thus contributed significantly to the growing empowerment of the Harijans in this region.

Of all the factors, however, it seems that the greatest catalyst for the empowerment of the lower castes is the rise in tourism to the valley, which has opened many new financial venues for locals. Many, seizing on such opportunities, have significantly improved their financial standing, which, while not affecting their ritual rights, has no doubt improved both their image and social capital in the village. A certain upper-caste person complained to me that this encourages some Harijans to cross the boundaries. They would occasionally try and touch a higher-caste person while he is eating, he explained, just to push the limit and see what happens. Other Harijans would delight upon seeing higher-caste people dining with ‘beef-eating’ foreigners, thus abandoning traditional customs and polluting themselves. The Harijans would use such piece of information to challenge the rationality behind the traditional seating arrangements in feasts, accusing the Thakurs of hypocrisy and inconsistency.

An excellent example is Sanjuram (pseudonym), who is a Harijan living in Old Manali, whose family has been able to gain much wealth and now owns an impressive guesthouse in the village. They also own other properties, which they rent out to outsiders. Sanjuram has been able to amass enough political clout to be elected to a certain political position in the village. Despite his newly gained wealth, political power

¹¹⁷ Low-caste person, Manali market, May 2, 2011, note 1. The polite and politically correct term for low castes in contemporary Kullu is Harijan (Children of God), a term originally coined by Gandhi. In other places in present-day India the term ‘dalit’ is much more common.

and social capital, Sanjuram is still unable to share his meals with upper-caste people or sit with them in public village feasts. Given his present respectability, Sanjuram resents the humiliation involved in being marked as an outcaste during public meals. Yet his political role and high commitment to local religion prevent him from simply avoiding such public events. He would therefore arrive in the event, take an active part in it, but then skip the meal and avoid the sitting-arrangements trap. While this ascetic-like practice is not easy at all—at times the festive feast would take place rather late in the day and be the first meal participants have since morning— Sanjuram prefers it to the public display of his lower-caste status.

But not many are ready for such a sacrifice. Most of the people in the village participate in the feast and sit according to their caste. Furthermore, devotees argue that the meal is a form of *prasād*, and that avoiding it is a sacrilegious act and offence to the goddess. Villagers often police one another (and especially the anthropologist, who, in my case, was always at a loss about where to sit), by constantly interrogating each other as to whether they had already eaten or not, when exactly, and how was the quality of the food? This means that every festival that involves a shared communal feast—the buffalo *bali* being a prime example due to its great popularity and high volume of participation—turns into an occasion for displaying and maintaining social divisions and caste hierarchies. A certain low-caste devotee of Haḍimbā, in his thirties, put it quite bluntly. He explained that higher-caste people know that the Harijans are highly devoted to Haḍimbā and will never abandon their faith nor stop participating in her rituals. Thus, he concluded, the public marking of caste during public meals will surely go on. “They [Thakurs] have one weapon,” he concluded. “You know what it is? God! We cannot forsake our Devī Devtā” (December 12, 2010, note 5).

Thus, the buffalo sacrifice does not only create and maintain unity, it also perpetuates inner divisions and caste hierarchies. In a time when new political and economic realities challenge the previous social structures and the relations between people and groups, the buffalo sacrifice can be seen, largely speaking, as a cultural arena for upholding the older order. Of course, as in the case of Sanjoram, it can also turn into an arena for struggle and for attempts to undermine existing structures and hierarchies, but as contemporary reality on the ground shows, this is not yet the case for everybody. The main divide in Kullu, between higher and lower castes, is still very well kept and efficiently reproduced during this grand event.

Interpreting Disorder

Examining the examples provided by locals about what forms of disorder the buffalo sacrifice is meant to remedy reveals another interesting aspect of this ritual. These examples of disorder are produced in a discourse that accompanies the ritual and that seeks to justify it in the eyes of locals. Thus, the ritual opens up a discursive and performative space for acknowledging, expressing and then resisting historically specific unwanted conditions.

In his famous essay, "Religion as a Cultural System," Geertz introduces an important distinction that can help us think about the buffalo sacrifice in this regard. He argues that religion is "a system of symbols" and of "cultural patterns" which function both as a *model of* and a *model for* reality:

In the first, what is stressed is the manipulation of symbol structures so as to bring them, more or less closely, into parallel with the pre-established nonsymbolic system, as when we grasp how dams work by developing a theory of hydraulics or constructing a flow chart. The theory or chart models physical relationships in such a way—that is, by expressing their structure in synoptic form—as to render them apprehensible; it is a *model of* "reality." In the second,

what is stressed is the manipulation of the nonsymbolic systems in terms of the relationships expressed in the symbolic, as when we construct a dam according to the specifications implied in a hydraulic theory or the conclusions drawn from a flow chart. Here, the theory is a model under whose guidance physical relationships are organized: it is a model *for* reality (Geertz 1973a: 93).

Ritual, Geertz continues, is the performative arena where both these models are displayed and clothed with “such aura of factuality” that the cultural pattern is perpetually reinforced and thus experienced as real.¹¹⁸

If we apply this interpretation to the buffalo sacrifice for the goddess Haḍimbā, we could argue that it functions as a model *of* reality, in the sense that it explains the disorders experienced in contemporary life as a result of the periodic rise of disturbing forces that are perceived as demonic in nature and embodied by the buffalo. At the same time, the ritual is also a model *for* reality, since it offers a way to act upon these unwanted forces and check their advance. It either displays their advance as a struggle between a demonic buffalo and a militant goddess, in which case the sacrifice of the former marks the triumph of the latter and the restriction of disorder by order; or it constructs the goddess as a power capable of fending off such undesired forces, provided that she is supplied with blood through sacrifice. In either case, reality is interpreted and constructed in this ritual as involving an eternal struggle between dharma and *adharmā*, order and disorder—or *śānti* and the lack of it, as Kulluvies would have it. Perceived as a struggle between a queen-like goddess and an intruding buffalo demon, or as a blood sacrifice to a goddess who is thus pacified and willing to help, the ritual paints a picture of a world that

¹¹⁸ Geertz (1973a). Interestingly, the main example given by Geertz to demonstrate his claim is of a cultural performance in Bali where “a terrible witch called Rangda engages in a ritual combat with an endearing monster called Barong.” It resembles the mythical struggle between the Devi and the buffalo demon, and Rangda is indeed often identified with Durgā (Geertz 1973a: 117).

is always under the threat of chaos and collapse, in which humans can, and should, confront these threats by playing their part and sacrificing buffalos to the goddess.

Geertz's symbolic anthropology has been criticized on various grounds. Ortner writes that Geertz has been "attacked by the positivists for being too interpretive, by the critical studies scholars as being too politically and ethically neutral, and finally by the interpretivists (themselves products of the Geertzian revolution) as being too invested in a certain concept of culture" (Ortner 1997: 1). Also famous is the criticism leveled against Geertz that he sidelined the embodied aspects of cultural performance, advocating instead the study of meaning, and urged scholars to understand culture as an ensemble of texts, "which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz 1973a: 452).¹¹⁹ Finally, Geertz is often accused on the grounds that his model of culture does not accommodate change and the possible ways in which cultural patterns may alter over time. In fact, I will dedicate the next part of this chapter (Resisting Disorder) to doing just this—examining how in contemporary Kullu, it is not only *śānti* that is being threatened, but the very model put forward by the ritual, namely, a vision of reality in which order is upheld by sacrificing buffalos to the goddess. Nevertheless, I feel that Geertz's suggestion that religion and ritual serve as a model *of* and *for* reality, is quite helpful in shedding light on intriguing aspects of the buffalo *bali* to the goddess Haḍimbā.

By portraying reality as a constant struggle between *śānti* and forces that seek to undermine it, the ritual leaves these two poles open for dynamic historical interpretations. Order, like disorder, is a rather fluid concept that can acquire new meanings in different

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Sax (2002: 3-15, 39-63).

times. Thus, the buffalo sacrifice, which is not performed annually but only periodically and according to need, enables people to constantly evaluate their reality, reflect on it, and make conscious the particular disorders they experience in their lives. This takes place in a discourse that revolves around the ritual, and during the debates on whether it should, or should not be performed and when. While the gods themselves, communicated through their mediums, are the ones announcing that the sacrifice should be performed, the final decision is taken during a discussion in which both the gods and the people participate. This discussion—‘gathering’ (*ikaṭṭhā*) as it is called here—serves as a platform for the deities and the people get to voice the issues they find distressing in contemporary reality.¹²⁰ While, as we will see in the next chapter, distressing weather conditions are always popular suspects for discussion, other issues too may come to the fore, such as declining faith and adherence to religious codes, social misconduct and health problems. Following the gathering, villagers keep discussing these issues among themselves, thus getting an additional chance to voice their opinions the challenges and problems in their reality, and on possible strategies to confront them.

A fascinating example took place in 2012. For a long time, many devotees have been annoyed with the extensive presence of hawkers and small-time vendors working on the grounds adjacent to Haḍimbā’s temple. These vendors do business by selling small souvenirs or offering tourists the chance to have their photo taken while holding big white rabbits, riding a yak or wearing local traditional dress. The ‘rabbit women’ (*khargoś vālī*), have drawn the most criticism, since they get into constant fights with each other competing for clientele. The gods themselves, as well as many villagers, have

¹²⁰ In most cases it is only the men who get to speak in such gatherings, though women can be present too. In gatherings of a smaller scale women, especially elderly ones, can also speak, often while being possessed.

been complaining about this improper behavior of the women during gatherings such as those mentioned above. Such misconduct, they stressed, should not take place so close to Haḍimbā's temple. These complaints, however, have never led to real preventive action. Since the women are part of the village community, and since taking action required someone to actually step up, confront these women, expel them from the ground and then prevent them from returning, nothing happened for a very long time. Yet the problem was on the table. In a gathering preceding the buffalo sacrifice of 2011, Śarvarī Mā, speaking through her medium, reminded the crowd that, in older times, even the king of Kullu used to get off his horse before entering the ground. The implication was clear - the ground is now treated with outrageous disrespect and the contemporary situation is a brutal breach of order. And still, nothing was done.

But then, during Haḍimbā's festival in May 2012, a deadly accident took place: A tree fell down in the nearby ground, killing one person. The gods, when questioned about the incident in a subsequent gathering, declared that it was a clear expression of Haḍimbā's displeasure with these practices, after she had repeatedly warned about them in the past (as indeed she did). A decision was quickly made by the villagers that the ground should immediately be cleared of all business activity and that a buffalo sacrifice should be offered to Haḍimbā within a month. This time the decision was carried out; the vendors were no longer allowed to work on the temple grounds. A vision of disorder, which had gradually built up in previous gatherings accompanying buffalo sacrifices, eventually yielded concrete action that reinstated order and a sought-after *śānti*. Whereas things must look grim from the point of view of the vendors themselves, who used to

work in the ground for a living, many others approve of the recent development and view it as the reconstitution of order.¹²¹

The buffalo *bali*, which operates as a mechanism that encourages locals to define the exact nature of the absence of *śānti* as well as the particular ways to restoring it, thus creates a discursive space for locals to make explicit their feelings about contemporary reality and the problems accompanying it. In some ways, the cultural role I am suggesting here for ritual is similar to one of the several functions Dongier ascribes to myths:

I would say that myths are remembered precisely because they are about the sorts of events in the past that are not bound to the past, that continue to be given meaning in the present... [M]ths are like dreams, there can never be a dream entirely unpolluted by secondary elaboration; to tell the dream—even to *recall* the dream—is to interpret it. As the culture retells the myth over time, it constantly reinterprets it, however much the culture may claim that the myth has been preserved intact. The myth provides a paradigm on which a number of meanings may be modeled (Doniger 1988: 31).

Just as myths are continuously reinvested with new meanings, the discourse on ritual, which presents the buffalo sacrifice as remedy for disorder, enables people to reflect on this disorder and invest it with historically particular meanings.

Resisting Disorder

Ritual as a Ground for Struggle

As I have noted above, Geertz's model of culture is often criticized for not accommodating change. I do not entirely agree with this criticism, since, to my mind, in his "Thick Description," Geertz attends to the dynamic aspect of culture and the ways in which symbols can acquire new meanings over time (Geertz 1973b). Yet it is true that according to his model, even if the meaning of particular symbols may change the overall

¹²¹ The incident described here took place when I had already finished my field research. I learned about it through phone calls and emails from several devotees. I did, however, witness the developing resentment towards the vendors throughout my fieldwork, as it surfaced in the aforementioned gatherings.

cultural paradigms remain intact. According to Geertz, the rituals that display and produce these paradigms, endure. This, however, as we will see, is not always the case.

In his “Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact,” Nicholas Dirks tells us of a village festival he was invited to when doing his fieldwork in Tamil Nadu. Arriving in the village at the designated day, after a long and tedious scooter ride, he was disappointed to discover that the festival had been, in fact, cancelled. To his surprise, he soon realized that due to a dispute in the village, the festival had not been performed in the village for at least seven years. This, Dirks notes, made him realize that a non-performance of a ritual is very much part of the ritual itself, just as the preparations, discussions and struggles that surround it, which determine how, and whether, it would be performed:

Speech about the festivals reflected concerns about ritual order and auspiciousness that were part of a another ritual order, different from that of the ritual event itself, and that even when the ritual event did not happen, it was as significant as when it did... I also learned that while at one level, the festival was about the reestablishment of control over disorder of a threatening nature, it was also about the range of possibilities that existed precisely at the moment of maximal contact between order and disorder (Dirks 1994: 490).

Similar controversies, concerning the performance of animal sacrifices, and buffalo sacrifices in particular, characterize contemporary H.P. and larger India as well.

A photo of a slain buffalo, laying in a pool of blood and surrounded by villagers, appeared on the cover of the October 3, 2009 issue of the weekly magazine *Himachal This Week*. The headline, in white letters printed over the black framing of the photo, read: “Does This Please God?” Anticipating the slaughter of buffalos that was about to take place all throughout the state during the upcoming Navarātra festival (Durgā Pūjā), this was part of the magazine campaign against what it called the “religious blindness and

absurd tradition” of sacrificing buffalos to the goddess. “The intellectual class,” wrote Narender Sharma of Karsog in one of the inside pieces, “opposes this act of animal sacrifice in the temple, but no one has come forward to stop it. People refrain from opposing the act because they are afraid of divine catastrophe.” Describing such sacrifice to the goddess Kāmākṣā Devī, he explains that “[t]he sacrifice is said to be a symbol of Goddess Kamaksha’s victory over demon Mahisasur, and the bull is regarded as Mahisasur.” He laments the performance of this “brutal act” and the fact that “[e]very year, people violate the country’s Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act in broad daylight, with no bother about the law. The administration and other people think it suitable to refrain from giving any statement against the animal sacrifice.” Yet, he concludes, there is still hope: “[N]ow various religious organizations have come out to oppose the practice... They say that people should-sacrifice anger, lust, greed and ego instead of sacrificing, an innocent animal” (Sharma 2009: 5).

This was not the only time that this magazine voiced such views. Part of the Divya Himachal Group, *Himachal this Week* is published in Dharamsala (District Kangra) and sold throughout the state for a mere five rupees. It is dedicated to advocating Himachal’s economic, educational and touristic development while, at the same time, protecting the environment and advocating clean politics. Published in English, it addresses the educated urban elites and is hardly read by common villagers in the area.¹²²

Non-Violence

Sacrifice, argues Urban, is central to Hinduism:

¹²² The people working in the only newsstand in Manali that sells this magazine report that they receive eleven copies of the magazine every week and that they have to really push hard to sell them. It is bought mainly by foreign and domestic tourists.

From the elaborate animal sacrifices of the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas to the internalized sacrifice of yoga and meditation in the Upaniṣads, to the great “sacrifice of battle” in the Epics, to the self-sacrifice of devotional love (*bhakti-yoga*) in the Bhāgavad Gīta (*sic.*), sacrifice is arguably one of the most persistent, unifying themes throughout the many complex traditions that we call Hinduism over the last 3500 years (Urban 2010: 51).

In the time of the Vedas and Brahmanas, animal sacrifice constituted the heart of the Aryan culture and was considered an indispensable practice that maintained the entire universe. The ritual killing, however, contained a fundamental ambivalence, which constituted one of the aspects of what Heesterman has called the inner conflict of tradition (Heesterman 1985). What was perceived as the source of life and order in the universe involved bloodshed, violence and death and hence was considered impure. Later on, in the time of the Upaniṣads, and following a long process of rationalizing and marginalizing this inconsistency, the conflict seemed to have been solved. The external slaughter of animals was “internalized” and replaced by a symbolic sacrifice of breath and self, which was accomplished through the practice of meditation and yoga. In ritual, blood offerings were often replaced with vegetarian ones to avoid the undesired violence.

Yet the tension did not disappear from all realms of Hinduism and kept resurfacing ever since. For example, Urban reminds us that “[e]ven as animal sacrifice gradually dropped out of mainstream Brāhmanic Hinduism, it survived and resurfaced in the Śākta and Tantric traditions” (Urban 2010: 52). He analyses the structure and symbolism involved in the blood sacrifices that have been offered for centuries to Kāmākhyā Devī in Assam, and shows how they invert the logic of the Vedic sacrifice.

Tantric sacrificial ritual is based on a series of structural inversions of the Vedic paradigm, which carefully juxtapose categories of purity and impurity in order to shatter the duality between them and unleash the liberating power of the goddess...a wild, impure animal [often a buffalo] is substituted for a domestic, pure one; the victim is beheaded in a bloody manner inside the ritual enclosure

instead of strangled outside the precincts; the severed head becomes the central focus of the ritual [whereas in the Vedic sacrifice it is ignored]; and the deity to whom it is offered is not the transcendent male god but the goddess in her most violent forms, the goddess who handles impurity and combats the forces of evil (Urban 2010: 67)

Particularly famous is the work done by Dumont on this topic. “Dumont’s most crucial, general thesis,” explains Fuller, “is that Hindu divinity is relational; it must be comprehended as a relationship between superior and inferior parts structured by the same principle that governs the caste hierarchy, namely, a complementary opposition between purity and impurity, expressed here by a dietary contrast” (Fuller 1992: 90). Dumont argues, in fact, that the same logic underlying caste society—one which is based on the binary opposition of purity and pollution—structures the divine pantheon as well (Dumont and Pocock 1959: 34-35). Deities’ relative status is predicated on the sort of sacrifices they receive. The gods who receive blood sacrifices, which are considered impure, are ranked lower in the hierarchy than those deities who are offered vegetarian oblations, which are perceived as pure. Importantly, Dumont argues that the two forms of sacrifice, though not equal, are both culturally legitimate and function as a mechanism for indexing the hierarchies of deities, as well as of the social groups who worship them.

Dumont’s work, of course, was much criticized for his purely structuralist analysis of Indian society and religion and for portraying them as essentially unchanging and thus ahistorical. He was also wrong in assuming that the purity-pollution principle was the sole determiner of status in India, ignoring the working of power and politics (Dirks 2001: 54-59). In addition, as shown by Babb in 1975, whereas North Indian gods who receive blood sacrifice are indeed often considered lower than those who do not, the overall hierarchy is much less obvious and not as clearly articulated as in the south (Babb 1975: 237-245). Yet we should not dispense with this principle all together since it is

obviously an important mechanism that is still central to structuring both earthly and divine hierarchies in India. A famous example is given by Srinivas, who in the 1950s studied the ways in which lower-caste groups embrace Brahmanic values and behaviors, including refraining from blood sacrifices, in order to elevate their social status by “purifying” their caste. Whereas, as Srinivas shows, the efforts at purification were not always complete—several of the groups’ deities kept receiving blood offerings—the attempts were nonetheless guided by this purity-pollution principle (Srinivas 1952).

In the same publication, Srinivas also makes an interesting observation regarding buffalo sacrifices:

All over peninsular India, with the exception of the Malayalam speaking areas, bull buffaloes are favourite animals for sacrifice to village-deities... Very recently, however, the local leaders of the Indian National Congress have been everywhere more or less successfully opposing the propitiation of village-deities with blood-offerings (Srinivas 1952: 180-81).

By that, Srinivas must be referring to the Tamil Nadu Prevention of Cruelties to Animals Act, 1950 (also known as the Madras Animal and Bird Sacrifices Abolition Act, 1950), which prohibited the killing of animals in religious rituals. This act was in many ways the outcome of the opposition to animal sacrifice that has grown in India since the late 19th century, which was derived, in large, from modern Hindu reformism that emerged as a result of the encounter with the British and the West. “The crucial features of modern religious reformism,” says Fuller, “which distinguish it from its precursors, are its patent adoption of ideas originating in the west and its fusion with social reform movements and political nationalism” (Fuller 1992: 99).

For all the nationalists rediscovering Hinduism, many "superstitious" beliefs and practices were objectionable because they did not belong to the authentic religion. Blood sacrifice was a clear case in point; to both progressives and conservatives (who were active in campaigns to ban cow slaughter), sacrifice

was a barbarity inconsistent with Hinduism's central tenet of nonviolence. In other words, as many writers have observed, the modern reformist vision of Hinduism—even in its putatively antireformist, neotraditionalist form—has a strongly elitist, Brahmanical dimension. Given all this, it is not so surprising that Congress members in Coorg in the 1940s were taking time and trouble to campaign against animal sacrifice, at first glance a rather odd preoccupation for political nationalists (Fuller 1992: 101).

This campaign, which led to the 1950 act mentioned above, turned, in fact, what was once a relational structure predicated on binary oppositions, into a substantive one, in which the high end of the spectrum gains absolute precedence whereas the lower end is completely excluded. As a result, animal sacrifice, which was once legitimate, even if low ranking, was growingly considered superstitious, immoral and illegitimate. This attempt—to portray one strand of Hinduism, usually an elitist Brahmanic one, as the authentic, and hence the only legitimate form of Hinduism—is politically charged and leads to the creation of what Romila Thapar has termed “syndicated Hinduism.” Thapar argues that the attempt to create a uniform and monolithic Hinduism comes at the cost of excluding and eradicating diverse religious strands that were once considered part of it, and is ultimately meant to mobilize the majority of the Indian population in a majority-based democracy and cater to the needs of the rising middle class. True to her Marxist principles, Thapar argues that India's lower classes are thus turned against the Muslim Others and are prevented from acting against their real oppressors - the higher classes (Thapar 1989).

Attempts to exclude animal sacrifice from what is considered legitimate Hindu ritual are still prevalent today. In 2003, following a sacrifice of 500 buffaloes in a village temple near the town of Tiruchi, Jayalalitha, the then chief minister of Tamil Nadu, instructed state officials to enforce the 1950 act and prevent the sacrifice of animals and birds in temples. M.S.S. Pandian analyzes the complex interests of the various social and

political actors that participated in the public debate that ensued: politicians, religious leaders, animal-rights activists, state officials, journalists and other individuals. In the final analysis, it turns out that while the elite urban middle classes, the Brahmins, and the Tamil Vellalrs, opposed the continuation of animal sacrifice, and hence supported Jayalalitha's instruction, rural villagers and lower-caste people argued that the custom should not be banned and hence objected the order (Pandian 2005). In the following year, Jayalalitha withdrew the order just before the general elections. According to the BBC, "senior leaders of Ms Jayalalitha's AIADMK party feared a backlash in the forthcoming general election if the ban was not lifted."¹²³ Interestingly, the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) provided a slightly different reason for this withdrawal: "she [Jayalalitha] withdrew the last year's order before the general election reportedly fearing that the gods would be upset if rituals were interfered with."¹²⁴

Pandian's analysis makes it clear that in the past several decades criticisms of animal sacrifice have been founded on two, often competing ideologies. While some people opposed the practice based on their sectarian *religious* ideology, arguing that animal sacrifice is not a legitimate Hindu practice, others rejected it on *secular* grounds, arguing that it is a backward, superstitious, and irrational custom that stands in stark contrast to modern and liberal values. Interestingly, the proponents of the act have also relied on both ideologies. On the one hand, they challenged the religious ideology, arguing that it represented a sectarian view, and that animal sacrifice is not only a legitimate Hindu ritual but also indispensable in securing the support of the gods. On the

¹²³ "Tamil Nadu lifts ban on sacrifice." http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3506623.stm , accessed on July 15, 2012.

¹²⁴ "India: 200 buffaloes sacrificed in Tamil Nadu temple." Reported in http://religion.info/english/articles/article_65.shtml , accessed on Jul 13, 2012.

other hand, they embraced secular rhetoric, maintaining that banning this form of worship undermines their freedom of religion, a major pillar of the secular state.

In the Himalaya, the conflicts over the legitimacy and practice of animal sacrifice seem to be especially prevalent. Comparing Pahari (mountain) religion with that of the plains, Gerald Berreman observed the following already in 1959:

Probably the most distinctive aspect of worship is the incorporation of animal sacrifice as an integral part of virtually every ceremony. The life of an animal is required to please the Pahari gods... In a low caste plains community such beliefs and practices would not seem unusual. The striking feature is that Sirkanda and other Pahari villages are predominantly high-caste communities which closely resemble low caste communities of other areas in the religious life of their members. It is for this reason that Paharis are considered ritually inferior by their plains-dwelling caste-fellows. And it is for this reason that plains emulation or Sanskritization is becoming increasingly evident among informed Paharis, who more and more frequently come into contact with critical plainsmen in positions of authority or influence. (Berreman 1993: 137)

Returning to the village of Sirkanda in 1968, approximately ten years after he had completed his fieldwork there, Berreman discovered that despite the pressures, “religion has been an area of fundamental stability” and that not much had changed while he was away (Berreman 1993: 378). He reports a buffalo sacrifice that was performed in the village during his visit:

For most [villagers] it was obviously an exhilarating experience, uniting them in a spectacular event of transcendent importance and deep religious significance, confirming and assuring their rapport with the ever-present, all-powerful supernatural, and displaying and validating their common Pahari identity and their continuity with the past and future. No evidence of secularization or Sanskritization was to be seen in the event. To me it exemplified the stability, vitality and distinctiveness of the Pahari version of Hinduism, despite considerable outside pressure and increasing pressure from within to Sanskritize in the manner of the people of the Gangetic Plain. (Berreman 1993: 379)

What is important to notice here, besides the central role played by the buffalo sacrifice in forging local people’s identity, is the fact that the pressures put by the

Sanskritic Hinduism of the plains, while not very influential, were already quite noticeable fifty years ago. Sax observes similar tensions in latter-day Garhwal, where many perceive the buffalo sacrifice as a unique marker of local culture and what embodies its very essence. Many of the mountain people, Sax writes, “are aware that buffalo sacrifice is denigrated by Hindus elsewhere, but to them this just goes to show that the custom is a distinctive part of the culture of Uttarakhand, which should be promoted rather than suppressed” (Sax 1991: 155). Mark Elmore reports about similar attitudes in Himachal Pradesh as well. A prolonged drought in the Simla district was attributed by villagers to a government ban on animal sacrifice to the powerful local goddess Bhīmākālī. This age-old tradition, essential for maintaining good relationships with the goddess, was seriously interrupted following complaints by Hindu tourists who visited the site and objected to the bloody act. Locals had no doubt that it was the ban that was imposed as a result of these complaints, which enraged the goddess and made her inflict the severe drought (Elmore 2005: 498-504).¹²⁵

In Manali, the situation is similar, though with interesting particularities. Animal sacrifices to the goddess Haḍimbā take place almost daily in her temple. The severed tree trunk, where chicken are sacrificed, is almost always covered with feathers and fresh bloodstains. Sheep and goats are also sacrificed here quite often. During the tourist season, when the long line of visitors winds through the temple yard, these sacrifices often take place later, in the evening or even at night, when most of the people are already gone. The animals are offered on a number of occasions, ranging from obligatory life-cycle ceremonies—such as a tonsure for a son (*muṇḍan*)—to thanksgiving rituals to

¹²⁵ I will discuss this episode more completely in the next chapter.

the goddess for her help, and repentance rituals, when devotees sacrifice in order to atone for exceptional misdeeds. Locals deem these rituals an indispensable part of their culture, and a marker of their close relationships with their goddess. Exceptionally large-scale rituals—such as one performed by a certain “army karate instructor” during which dozens of sheep were offered—are revered, commemorated and reported with great pride as expressions of laudable devotion to the goddess.

An interesting equilibrium seems to have developed in the region throughout the years with regard to sacrificial and vegetarian ideals. Whereas many of the region’s goddesses and gods accept blood sacrifices, a number of male gods identified as Ṛṣi (Vedic sages) do not. Particularly interesting in this regard is Manu Ṛṣi, the presiding deity of Old Manali village, who, as I have mentioned earlier, maintains very close relationships with Haḍimbā, with whom he shares a palanquin. Manu, being a Ṛṣi, does not accept blood sacrifices and is only worshipped with vegetarian offerings. Yet since he shares his *pālki* with Haḍimbā, animal sacrifices must occur in his presence and the pieces of meat offered to the goddess are thus placed in front of him as well. To avoid a conflict, Manu’s mask is covered with a special cloth whenever this act takes place. In my long discussions with locals about the nature and history of Haḍimbā’s and Manu’s relationship, no one has ever voiced any unease regarding the resolution of this fundamental tension. The sole exception was a certain woman from Old Manali who kept challenging it, arguing that if Manu was an all-seeing powerful god, it made no sense that his vision could be blocked with a simple veil; all the others were quite comfortable with this procedure. This peaceful coexistence of two radically different ritual practices, embodied in Haḍimbā’s and Manu’s shared palanquin, nicely illustrates the balance between vegetarian and non-vegetarian ideals that seems to have existed in Kullu for a

long time. The same balance can be seen during the buffalo sacrifice itself, when, in addition to animals—sheep, a pig and a water-crab—the offerings include coconuts and a pumpkin as well.¹²⁶

This mutual acceptance, displayed here between Manu and Haḍimbā, reflects on their devotees as well. Most of the villagers here are non-vegetarians who love and enjoy their meat. Chicken, and especially goat-meat and mutton, are celebrated dishes, and the meals in which they are served, are much appreciated and well attended. Villagers also take special pride in their local dry meat, a special dish that is eaten all throughout the harsh winter, and is understood to keep one warm and healthy. Large slices of drying meat can still be found hanging from houses' ceilings before and during the winter months. Yet vegetarians are also common. Locals say that about 25% of the villagers in the region refrain from eating meat. Unsurprisingly, several of these vegetarians avoid participating in the sacrifice—after all, dietary vegetarianism has gone hand in hand in India with the rejection of animal sacrifice for millennia.¹²⁷ Despite their criticism, however, most of Haḍimbā's vegetarian devotees do arrive for the ritual and participate in the public feast. They are fully accommodated and served vegetarian food that is cooked especially for them. As with caste, the whole arrangement is highly visible, as the vegetarians are seated separately and in some distance from the others.

¹²⁶ For those who are not used to it, the effect of this combination can be rather amusing. Anna, a Swedish tourist, who visited the temple on the day of the sacrifice, described her experience of the intense moments of the sacrifice as follows: "First, I saw the buffalo, and all I could think of was: 'A buffalo!...Ahahahahaha.' And then, turning my head, I saw a pumpkin. I was thinking: 'A pumpkin...?! What the hell...?!'" (Anna, Old Manali, June 29, 2009, note 1).

¹²⁷ Isru, for example, an elderly villager from Old Manali, told me that he did not like the sacrifice and thus avoided participating in it. He said he could not see what the point in killing animals was. Violence, he explained, is freely inflicted on others, never on ourselves: "See how we cry if we just slightly injure our hand." He claimed to have been a vegetarian for over 30 years (Isru, Old Manali, July 12, 2009, note d).

Yet not all is quiet on the Manali front. The growing influx of mostly urban middle-class Hindu tourists from the plains creates tensions concerning this practice. In other places in India, attempts to cater for tourists' tastes sometimes lead to the pacification of local goddesses and the suppression of their violent nature. Such, for example, is the case with Vindhyavāsini, of the Vindhya mountain, where animal sacrifice has been restricted, pilgrimage routes embodying tantric *yantras* have been shortened, and traditional tantric texts, telling the story of this violent goddess, have been hidden and replaced with stories of the great goddess Mahādevī (Humes 1996). In Manali, at least for now, the struggle is still going on and criticism by outsiders is outright rejected.

In one such incident, a female tourist from Delhi, probably in her late forties, approached Tuleram—Haḍimbā's medium—who was sitting on the temple's balcony. She began asking him about the sacrifice of a chicken that had taken place a few minutes earlier. Anxious, she complained that her young son happened to witness the beheading of the bird and was completely shocked. She said that there could be no justification for the killing of innocent animals: "animals cannot talk, they cannot say 'I'm somebody's brother, I'm somebody's mother.' Why are you doing this?" Tuleram, obviously annoyed, and probably fed up with complaints such as these from opinionated outsiders, replied briefly: "This is our system, and if you do not like it you can go. Go go...!" He waived his hand in the air, dismissing her and signaling that the conversation was over. The woman kept talking and said that she was simply trying to understand why anyone would do such a thing. She herself was a vegetarian, she added, and hence could not understand it. But Tuleram refused to continue the exchange. "And she's making all this fuss just for a chicken," I told Raman, one of Haḍimbā's *pujārīs*, who was standing next

to me as we were watching the whole exchange. “Yes,” he replied, “just imagine what would happen if she saw the *buffalo* sacrifice, with all the blood and everything. She would freak out completely.” Later, when the woman left and Tuleram came down, he explained to me what this was all about. “There are many demons (*bhūts*) living here and we sacrifice for them so that they will make things calm (*śānti*.) They will take the offering and calm down. In older times, the king of Kullu used to perform the buffalo sacrifice. But he does not do that anymore, so today this is our duty.” He repeated the English word ‘duty’ several times (Tuleram, Haḍimbā temple, June 10, 2009, note d).

Incident like these are not rare. Tourists often do not like the blood sacrifices and sometimes indeed voice their resentment. The following conversation, between me, Chinulal, and his father, Lalchand—two of Haḍimbā’s *pujārīs*—took place right after a visiting tourist had questioned them about the performance of the buffalo sacrifice:

Chinu: Many people come here like this, saying that animal sacrifice should not be performed.

Udi: This is what they say?

Chinu: Many [people]. Many.

Lalchand: We give them this answer: ‘look, we also believe that it should not be performed. But tell me one thing – when you yourself go to a restaurant, you eat tandoori chicken, no? So why then do you tell the *mātā* – ‘do not eat the sacrifice’?’ (we all laugh...) If I have a goat, why won’t I give it to the *mātā*? What else can I give, and from where? Should I steal for that?

Chinu: Alongside positive things there are always negative things as well. For example, if we sacrifice a buffalo, it is not the *mātā* who takes it.¹²⁸ Along with the *mātā* there are all kinds of powers, and in order to keep them down [quiet, not harmful] we do the sacrifice.

Udi: Together with the *mātā*? Who are they [these negative powers]?

Chinu: *Khinkri bhinkri*.

Udi: What is this—‘*Khinkri Binkri*’?

Lalchand: They are like the demons [*rākśasas*] I told you about from the time of Manu. He [Manu] sacrificed his wife to keep them quiet. Together with the *mātā* there are some of them as well. Demon-type [*rākśas-type*].

¹²⁸ “Thoḍī letī hai.” Whereas the literal meaning of this sentence is “she takes only a little bit,” in the Kullu Valley this expression is used to denote complete negation: “she takes nothing at all.”

Udi: So [the sacrifice] is not for the *mātā*?

Both: No! No!

Lalchand: We call them *bahan*.

Udi: What is *bahan*?

Lalchand: Helper!

Chinu: It is like this - together with the negative there's always the positive, no? Wherever there's good there is also bad. What is true for humans is also true for the gods—some are good, some are bad.

Lalchand: They are just like important people, who must keep a wall around them.

Udi: You mean security? Bodyguards? [many people have presented this analogy before]

Lalchand: Yes! And then, you have to give them some alcohol to drink at night, no? [...]

Udi: So do tourists get angry? Do they say anything?

Lalchand: Yes. One time, when we were about to perform a buffalo sacrifice, one lady arrived here. She said: 'Don't kill the buffalo, kill me [instead]!' (Lalchand starts laughing). [She said:] 'Cut *me*. Cut *me*. Don't cut the buffalo. Cut me instead.' So we told her: 'First you should go to the SDM [Sub-Divisional Magistrate] and bring from him something in writing, saying 'I want to be sacrificed instead of the buffalo.' Then we will cut you! Otherwise, we cannot cut you just like that. Go to the police. Bring from them something in writing, saying 'I want to die instead of the buffalo.'"

Udi: So you mean that she made a big scene?

Lalchand: We told her: 'If you really want to save the buffalo, we have shown you the way! Now go, bring something in writing from the police saying that you want to die instead of the buffalo!' [Lalchand is telling all this in a very funny way and we all laugh].

Udi: Who told her that?

Chinu: [Points at his father, Lalchand.] One man facing ten people - what can he do? He will surely lose!

Lalchand: We told her: Go! Go to the police.' [*ja ja – police ja ja*']

Lalchand: These things happen. Some people come here and make drama about the cutting.

Udi: What do they say?

Lalchand: They say: 'Don't cut. Don't do this. Don't do that...' So we explain to them (Lalchand softens his voice and speaks in a friendly manner): 'What can we do brother? That's the way it is. This is our custom. In older times people did not have money. They had a very small variety of produce. All they had was sheep and goats. They grew them, they ate them themselves, and they gave them to their gods. This is our tradition. This is how it was and this is how it will be. When will this finish? When we ourselves—all of us—don't eat meat anymore. When this happens we will have no reason to offer animals anymore. But as long as we eat, we will offer it to God [Bhagvān] as well: 'Eat too.' This is the explanation I give [...] Haḍimbā accepts this meat. But will we tell Raghunāth Jī: 'You should eat this too'? Or [sacrifice to] god Kṛṣṇa? They will not eat it! So we don't offer them [blood sacrifice].

Udi: It is like this with Manu Ṛṣi, no?

Lalchand: Yes. This is why we put a veil on him [covering Manu Ṛṣi's mask when animals are offered to Haḍimbā, with whom he shares his palanquin]. This is how we explain [the sacrifice to tourists]. This is what *I* do. I explain to them and then they leave silently [...]

Chinu: The others—Raman brother, and Amit [other *pujārīs*]*—they don't even discuss it. 'Go away,' they say, 'do your pūjā, take the prasād and leave!' They don't discuss this so much as we do (Lalchand and Chinulal, Haḍimbā temple, January 12, 2011, note 2).*

The pressures put on Haḍimbā's *pujārīs* by tourists critical of the animal sacrifice are evident. The latter inquire about the bloody custom, question it, and at times, display their disapproval with a vengeance—as was the case with the lady who wished to stop the buffalo *bali* by offering herself in his stead. Lalchand and Chinu are particularly accommodating and make special efforts to explain the practice to outsiders. They reason with them and explain the origin of the custom and the logic behind it as they see it. They emphasize the fact that this has been a local tradition for many ages and that there is no reason to go about changing it now. They argue that the real recipients of the animal offerings are malevolent (“negative”) powers that everywhere accompany the benevolent (“positive”) ones. This line of defense allows them to exonerate Haḍimbā, presenting her as a benevolent master who takes care of her devilish bodyguards. Interestingly, the two also expose the hypocrisy—and ‘drama’—of many of their criticizers, who, while eating meat themselves, deny it to their gods. They thus shift the discussion from the high moral ground of the traditional Sanskritic discourse to the actualities of everyday life in contemporary India, where many who demand their gods to practice vegetarianism do not, in fact, practice it themselves.¹²⁹ Lalchand and Chinu, in a smart tactical move, claim

¹²⁹ In a conversation with Neel on this very subject, he pursued the same kind of logic. The animal being sacrificed, he argued, is actually lucky, since its real choice was not between life and death, but between being offered to god in sacrifice and being slaughtered to be sold in the market as simple food (Neel, Manali Market, May 3, 2011, note b).

that they too oppose this practice, but until all people have changed their ways and renounced eating meat, there is no real reason why the gods should do so themselves (though, I should note, the buffalo itself is not eaten by devotees but thrown in the river, so this logic does not work here completely).¹³⁰ They also hint that ritual practices should not be imposed, or banned, coercively. Reminding visitors that locals do not force blood sacrifice on gods who do not take it, they seem to imply that strict vegetarian should not be imposed on the carnivorous gods.

Interestingly, what becomes clear from this conversation—in which the two *pujārīs* present such a wide range of ready-made explanations and tactics to deal with this criticism—is that they indeed encounter it often, and hence were compelled to develop a comprehensive and detailed response to it. While Lalchand and Chinu find it important to enlighten outsiders about the situation in Kullu and convince them that the blood sacrifice is legitimate, not all *pujārīs* are so accommodating. Raman Sharma, for example, and his brother Amit, are not as receptive. They refuse to even engage in conversation with such critical outsiders, who feel they have the right to impose their own personal views on others. Performing their duties as *pujārīs*, Raman and Amit apply *ṭīkās* on these visitors' foreheads and offer them the necessary *prasād*, but then they send them on their way, refusing to grant legitimacy to their claims by even responding to it.

¹³⁰ This fact, of course, dramatically separates buffalo *bali* from other blood offerings made to Haḍimbā, which are subsequently consumed by her devotees. Villagers did not provide any analytic explanation for this fact but simply argued that this is the way the buffalo has always been treated. One explanation, of course, could be that behind the restriction on its consumption is the great resemblance between a buffalo and a cow. Another explanation could be that this unique ritual is meant to be enjoyed by the goddess, and the goddess alone, and thus cannot be further shared. The lack of any utilitarian value in such sacrifice to devotees therefore makes it a sort of a potlatch and a clear mark of the community's gratitude to the goddess expressed in an offering for which they get nothing material in return.

Haḍimbā too, according to her devotees, fends off attempts to interfere with the buffalo sacrifice. A popular example was reported to me, in different versions, by several devotees. Here is one, by Nil P.K. from Dhungri, in his late thirties:

One time, about three-four years ago, a certain SDM [Sub-Divisional Magistrate, who is also in charge of the local police] was stationed here during the time of the buffalo sacrifice. He said: ‘I will stop this sacrifice! I will not permit such a thing.’ He was probably a new SDM—I am not sure—I was pretty young at the time.¹³¹ But the *māitā* said [through her medium]: ‘Do not worry. This will not happen [the sacrifice will *not* be stopped]. If he tries to stop it I will take care of it myself.’ Then, a day before the sacrifice, he [the SDM] was transferred from here. At that time he was hardly stationed here for two months, and still he was transferred on that day (Nil P.K., Manali market, May 3, 2011, note b).

Whereas Haḍimbā’s head priest Rohitram was reluctant to confirm the accuracy of this incident, the story is quite popular among devotees. In general, locals are quite certain of Haḍimbā’s complete authority in her region and the superiority of her powers over those of the state. As another devotee explained quite plainly when we discussed this matter, Kullu was the Valley of Gods, and hence subject to the Rule of Gods (*dev nīti*), rather than to the Rule of Kings (*rāj nīti*—politics).

Haḍimbā’s great power and ability to manipulate the state is commemorated in a story about her exploits in 1977. This time the story was told by Rohitram himself:

It was in the time of the Emergency [the Emergency Rule imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975]. At that time, the men used to run away from their homes during daylight [fearing forced sterilization by the government]. Only women and children stayed at home. Someone in the village targeted me. He said: ‘He has five kids, so first do his operation.’ But I said: ‘Hi friend, but I have no children at all. That man has no children of his own and hence he wants to prevent me from having any too.’ But they said: ‘No! We will forcefully do your operation.’ So people told me, you must not stay here. But I thought, I will wait and see what others are doing. Then, there was one officer here. A magistrate.

¹³¹ This incident must have taken place earlier than three-four years ago. Nil P.K. uses this timeframe to simply indicate that it took place in the not-so-distant past.

Police. He caught people and did [the serialization] by force. But I did not go. I thought: ‘I will not go.’ Two times they came to my house. They came in the morning. The officer came—the police—and they asked: ‘Where did he go?’ So the people told them: ‘He went earlier. He went somewhere.’ And then they came again. So I thought: ‘Ok. I will wait for them and see.’ I kept a gun with me - a double barrel. I thought: ‘If the officer comes, the police—these bastards—I will fire them!’ The people at home said I should not do this. They said I should hide. But I did not want to sit like a coward and hide from them. These bastards. They did take some people. They did very dirty things. People feared them a lot. And then people thought: ‘What should we do?’ They called *everyone* here, just like nowadays we sometime convene. They said: ‘Come. Let’s go and ask the *mātā*.’ Then, when the people arrived there, the father of Tulerm was there [who was the medium of Haḍimbā at the time]. The Devī used to come on him [possess him] properly. She said: ‘I am giving them only three days and then the emergency will be over! Those who are in power now, I will change them myself. Everything is about to change.’ And I thought: ‘She is lying. How can this be? What - will she kill Indira Gandhi? How can this be?’ Everybody said: ‘Such a big thing. She will be arrested. They will arrest the celā [the medium] too.’ And then the medium left. Three days later we heard on the radio: ‘The Emergency is over. There are going to be Elections.’ This happened after exactly three days! (Rohitram, his house, May 4, 2011, note b).

Yet despite Haḍimbā’s success in resisting external powers, things are not so simple. Locals are completely aware of and acknowledge the great power exercised by the state over their lives. Even the ridiculing of the woman who opposed the buffalo sacrifice reveals this fact. Though only jokingly, Lalchand instructed the woman that she should obtain a written permission from the police in order for them to be able to sacrifice her. He could have said that she should request Haḍimbā’s permission and only if the latter agreed would they go ahead and do it. Given that the chances of the lady fulfilling any of these conditions were fairly slim, Lalchand’s choice reveals something not only about his sense of humor, but also about his recognition of the state’s ability to authorize or ban this ritual.

Similar ambivalence concerning the state’s ability to ban the buffalo sacrifice is revealed in the signboard situated near the goddess’ temple. Whereas the old Hindi signboard concluded by noting that the annual Daśahrā festival in Kullu cannot take place

without the participation of Haḍimbā, the new signboard adds two important sentences: “The kings of Kullu think of her as their grandmother. During the Duśahrā, a special *pūjā* is performed in Haḍimbā's honor. And in the end of the Duśharā, a sacrifice of eighteen (*aṣṭāṅg bali*) is offered to Haḍimbā, which includes a buffalo sacrifice as well.” It seems that Rohtiram, who is the one who revised the text that had been in use on the old signboard, wished to stress both Haḍimbā's close relationship with the traditional ruling dynasty and the fact that a buffalo sacrifice is offered to her by them during the festival. To state that the sacrifice is performed annually by one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the valley no doubt strengthens its legitimacy. It also signals that Rohitram is not ashamed but rather proud of the fact that Haḍimbā is a recipient of blood sacrifices, celebrating rather than concealing it. At the same time, he refrains from mentioning that similar buffalo sacrifices also take place in Dhungri, which indicates that he may be concerned that flagging *this* event, which is not patronized by the powerful king's family, may draw attention and jeopardize the *bali*.

"Whenever She Comes as Kālī, She Demands Blood!"¹³²

Of all the motifs by means of which local people seek to explain, defend and promote the legitimacy of blood sacrifice to the goddess Haḍimbā, the most common one is her identification with the goddess Kālī. Neither the colonial accounts mentioned in the previous chapter nor the *Vaṃśāvalī* identify Haḍimbā as the goddess Kālī. There are no wooden carvings of Kālī on the temple façade, and there is no clear mark of this side of her personality on her palanquin. As in the case of her involvement with the Mahābhārata, here too there is no ancient body of stories dealing with Haḍimbā as Kālī,

¹³² Local woman, chai stall near Haḍimbā temple, April 1, 2011, note i.

and the few narratives that are told about this aspect of her identity seem to rely more on Sanskritic traditions than on any local ones. This is not to say that locals are not familiar with these narratives. Dileram, for example, an elderly yak owner from Old Manali, insisted on telling me the story about Kālī stepping on her husband Śiva almost every time we met. And indeed, the identification of Haḍimbā with the goddess Kālī is presently ironclad a common knowledge among her devotees. Many villagers refer to Haḍimbā as Kālī when speaking about her, and her medium, Tuleram, is known for sticking out his long red tongue on the day of the buffalo sacrifice in a manner that resembles the way Kālī is often portrayed in iconic representations.

Shamlal, one of Haḍimbā's *pujārīs*, described how certain elements of the temple architecture are modeled after the icon depicting Kālī stepping on Śiva's corpse:¹³³

Shamlal: There are two 'pots' here [*khapaḍ*]¹³⁴—one here and one outside. This one [the inside 'pot'] is the main one. When they sacrifice the buffalo outside and pour the blood to the 'pot' there, they also sacrifice here. It is necessary.

Udi: What do they sacrifice here?

Shamlal: A he-goat, a she-goat - whatever we have.

Udi: So on that day it is necessary to sacrifice inside as well?

Shamlal: Yes. On that day it is especially important. Pouring blood here on that day is very important.

¹³³ This famous icon has been the subject of many interpretations. A common one is that this is a tantric symbol that expresses the supremacy of Kālī over the world and gods. She is in rage, naked, and her tongue is a sign of her bloodthirstiness. Yet in contemporary interpretations it is often perceived as an expression of the goddess' shame when she realizes that in her rage she had stepped on her husband Śiva, and thus violated familial values and codes of proper conduct. In Orissa, for example, those adhering to this interpretation argue that this incident followed the killing of Mahiṣāsura by the goddess, who then proceeded to destroy the gods as a revenge for the boon given by them to the buffalo demon, which forced her to disrobe in order to kill him. Śiva then took the form of a corpse in order to have her thus step on him and thus stop her. This story, however, is mentioned neither in the *Devī Māhātmya* nor in the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*, but appears in a 15th century text of the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa* (Menon and Shweder 2003). Kinsley notes that it can also be found in the *Adbhūta Rāmāyaṇa*, the Oriyan *Rāmāyaṇa* of Sārāla Dāsa, and the Bengali *Jaiminibharata Rāmāyaṇa* (Kinsley 1987: 130 footnote 39).

¹³⁴ *Khapaḍ* in Pahari, or *khappar* or *khopḍī* in Hindi, means a clay pot, coconut shell, skull or a head, or a begging bowl. Shamlal uses this word to describe two holes in the ground into which the blood of the sacrifice animal, or the cracked coconut, is poured, and the blood-filled cup held by Kālī in the poster he refers to.

Udi: But why here?

Shamlal: Because this is the ‘pot’. This is the main one. It is like it is shown here (Shamlal points to the poster hanging at the back of the temple that shows Kālī stepping on Śiva). She holds the ‘pot’ in this hand. [Shamlal means that just as Kālī holds the ‘pot’ in her left hand, so is the temple ‘pot’ situated to the left of Haḍimbā’s main manifestation in the temple]

Udi: And tell me, is it true that when the buffalo sacrifice takes place, the *mātā* comes in the form of Kālī?

Shamlal: Exactly. She takes the form of Kālī.

Udi: Who is Kālī, really?

Shamlal: Presently [at the time we speak, i.e. in ordinary times], Kālī [i.e. Haḍimbā] is in the form of Durgā. She has nine forms, approximately. When the sacrifice takes place, then she [Haḍimbā] comes in the form of Kālī.

Udi: But what is the meaning of this form of Kālī?

Shamlal: Previously Kālī brought destruction upon the earth. She used to cut down people. This is why she wears a rosary of heads (*mūṅḍ kī mālā*). This is why Śiva Ji himself lay down on the earth, in order to stop her. This is also why she holds a ‘pot’ in her left hand [which is filled with blood]. When she stopped, Śiva told her: ‘You must not eat humans any more. You should not take humans’ blood any more but just offerings of coconut.’ It is like a head. Then Śiva Ji Bhagvān said: ‘Instead of this [human’s blood] we will offer you goats, sheep, etc.’ Then this [human sacrifice] was over. Otherwise, she would still eat humans and drink their blood. This is her thing.

Udi: So the same happened with Haḍimbā?

Shamlal: Yes. It was like this with the *mātā* as well. Long time ago. Lord Śiva, Viṣṇu... three of them stopped her and told her: ‘Instead of humans we will give you animals (*paśu*).’ This is why we sacrifice goats, sheep and buffaloes. So she is stopped (Shamlal, Haḍimbā temple, April 1, 2011, note f).

In the months preceding the two buffalo sacrifices I participated in, I noticed that as the day approached, locals increasingly referred to Haḍimbā as Kālī. While normally the Mahābhārata face would dominate Haḍimbā’s presentation to others, as the sacrifice got closer, the Kālī face gradually took over. Thus, for example, Rakesh Thakur, a local singer who is of the habit of visiting Haḍimbā’s temple every day, emphasized this aspect of her personality whenever we met there in the days leading to the event. On the day of the ritual itself, I overheard Tirthram—Haḍimbā’s *kārdār*—explaining the reasons for the performance of the sacrifice to a group of visiting Sikhs. Aside from providing the usual reasons—the importance of the ritual for restoring universal śānti and protecting the

whole world from harm—Tirthram kept mentioning the fact that Haḍimbā was, in fact, an incarnation of the goddess Kālī, and hence must be provided with this blood. This explanation was on everybody’s tongues the closer we got to the day of the event.

But why Kālī? Why is the face of Kālī foregrounded in this context and not that of Durgā, who is the one who actually kills the buffalo in the myth? The answer is threefold. First, as we have seen already, while locals are aware of the myth of Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī and do associate it with the sacrifice, this association is not frequently mentioned as the reason behind the ritual. Thus, even for those who remember the details of the myth, it is easy to forget the centrality of Durgā in this context. Second, what becomes clear to anyone visiting the temple on the day of the *aṭhārah bali* is the overwhelming presence of blood in and around the temple. Alongside the buffalo, whose own blood covers the whole area outside the temple’s door, four sheep are slaughtered at each of the four corners of the structure and their blood flows there as well. In the hours following the sacrifice, visitors who approach the temple for *pūjā*, or just walk around in the ground, are literally stepping in blood, an experience that leaves quite an impression. Under these conditions, the association of Haḍimbā with Kālī, who is particularly known for her bloodthirstiness, makes much sense. It was she, after all, as told in the *Devī Māhātmya*, who drank the blood of the demon Raktabīja. This was the only way to defeat the latter since when attacked and injured conventionally, every drop of his blood that touched the ground immediately turned into a new demon.¹³⁵ Third, since Kālī is herself considered

¹³⁵ *Devī Māhātmya* 8.39 - 8.62. See Coburn (1991: 66-68). Kinsley observes the following in this regard: “She [Kālī] is usually shown on the battlefield, where she is a furious combatant who gets drunk on the hot blood of her victims” (Kinsley 1987: 116).

an angry and violent goddess, her association with Haḍimbā, whose *rākṣasī* origins we have already discussed at length above, is only natural.¹³⁶

Furthermore, what seems to be a particularly interesting reason for foregrounding Haḍimbā's Kālī face in this context is the fact that it serves as a sort of a ready-made image that can easily bridge the more carnivorous Hinduism of the mountains with the largely vegetarian one of the urban centers and plains. Kālī has always been an icon through which violent rural goddesses were brought into the fold of Sanskrit Brahmanic Hinduism. For centuries, she has played an intermediary role that enabled absorbing, and then slowly pacifying, bloodthirsty village goddesses, who would otherwise have difficulties finding their place within the Brahmanic pantheon.¹³⁷ The explanatory value of Kālī, and the immediate legitimacy that her name grants to Haḍimbā and her blood sacrifices, is unmistakable. It is clear that this association enables many of the outside visitors to find a place instantly for the unusual practices they witness within a familiar conceptual and religious framework. This, it should be mentioned, is effective not merely with outsiders, but with insiders as well. The availability of such an acceptable figure as that of Kālī, who is both bloodthirsty yet undoubtedly pan-Indian and Hindu, is instrumental in enabling locals to find a place for themselves, and in their own eyes, at the pan-Indian table. Haḍimbā, they may think, though a *rākṣasī* of violent and bloodthirsty nature, is still entirely Hindu, and thus so are they, her devout followers.

¹³⁶ Buffalo sacrifices to the goddess Kālī are also quite popular in Bengal. McDermott notes that “(a)lmost all Kālī temples established prior to the early nineteenth century offer facilities for goat or buffalo sacrifice” (McDermott 2011: 208).

¹³⁷ Here is what McDermott writes in this regard. While she refers here mostly to the history of Kālī in Bengal, her observations are probably true for the rest of India as well: “In a sense, Kālī's whole history, or as much as we know of it, can be seen through the lens of Sanskritization as a gradual progression from the peripheries of settled culture, where she was probably a tribal deity who answered pragmatic concerns, to the center of a popular urban and rural cult, where her priests are Brahman and her sphere of operation transcendental” (McDermott 2001: 296).

While not articulated explicitly in this way, the ‘Kālī card’ is so often pulled out to justify all that may be disturbing to outsiders about Haḍimbā that it leaves little doubt about its role as a mechanism for coping with criticism. Interestingly, and similarly to the foregrounding of Haḍimbā’s Mahābhārata face discussed in the previous chapter, here too, highlighting Haḍimbā’s identity as Kālī enables locals to celebrate, rather than conceal, her bloodthirsty nature. Instead of playing down such elements, and attempting to erase them from memory, the image of Kālī, who is herself quite demonic and *rākṣasī*-like, provides room for legitimizing these facets of Haḍimbā, and even bringing them to the fore with pride.

At the same time, however, and just as in the previous chapter, this “strategy” can turn into a double-edged sword. Embracing the pan-Indian image of Kālī brings with it a whole set of ideas and values that cause difficulties. As the following conversation with Sunita¹³⁸ shows, whereas locals see the benevolent side of the goddess, some of the tourists are quite critical of Kālī, believing her to be a malevolent and destructive deity:

[I ask Sunita who is her family deity (*grh kudz*)]

Sunita: Haḍimbā. She is ours [family deity]. Haḍimbā. Kālī Mātā. She has many forms, no? Many many.

Udi: Tell me, who is this Kālī really?

Sunita: It is a form of her [of Haḍimbā] - when she becomes angry. Then she takes on the form of Kālī.

Udi: And what does she do? I mean, when she gets angry?

Sunita: Nowadays she does nothing. In older times she did some things.

Udi: Like what?

Sunita: Like wars and other things - when she got angry. But this was a long time ago.

Udi: Whom did she fight against?

Sunita: It was a long time ago. Nowadays nothing happens. In our time nothing has happened. Nothing at all.

Udi: You mean that now she is quiet?

¹³⁸ Sunita and Kimi (who will be mentioned soon) are two women who run a small stall near the temple where they sell woolen socks and baby suits, *prasād*, and photo opportunities with white furry rabbits.

Sunita: Now she is calm [*śānt*].

Udi: Is this a good thing?

Sunita: Of course. She is calm. This is a good thing. If she got angry, then things would have been much harder.

Udi: She will eat us.

Sunita: No. She will not eat us. If people think this and similar [bad things], then she becomes angry with them. But otherwise she's calm. She does nothing. She only gives good fortune. We just need to say: 'Victory to the mother' [*jay mātā*], and all is clam.

Udi: So in order to keep her calm, what should we do?

Sunita: Nothing, brother! Nothing at all. She will do no harm. Some people say she will eat.

Udi: What will she eat?

Sunita: This is what people say.

Udi: What? Humans?

Sunita: This is what people say. But she doesn't do that. She does not eat humans. She only gives us peace and tranquility [*śānti*].

Udi: Who says that she eats humans?

Sunita: The tourists, who come here, etc. They say: 'She takes the form of Kālī. She eats humans.' This is what they say

Udi: This is what they say? That they sacrifice people here?

Sunita: Listen brother, nothing like this has ever taken place in front of us [in our lifetime]. They never sacrificed humans. This is just people talking - saying that she eats [humans].

Udi: Where do they come from, these people?

Sunita: What do I know? They come from below (from the plains). This is what they say. She never does such things. Never!

Udi: They talked like this in front of you?

Sunita: Yes. So I told them: 'Why did you come here then?' Then they kept quiet and went away These people think that this is still going on. Nothing! It is nothing like that (Sunita, near Haḍimbā temple, April 1, 2011, note e).

Sunita is rather annoyed and keeps stressing that Haḍimbā is a good and calm deity. She has never harmed anyone and only helps her people. The tourists, who come from 'below,' think of her as Kālī and thus get wrong ideas. Sunita's solution for this tension is to push things back into the past. Haḍimbā used to be an angry goddess, but

this was a very long time ago. Now she is perfectly calm, caring and benevolent. The tourists just do not get it.¹³⁹

Another disturbing difficulty arises from the fact that the identification of Haḍimbā as Kālī is actually never mentioned in the Mahābhārata—neither in the critical version, nor in the TV series. Haḍimbā's *pujārīs* address this conundrum the same way they addressed other narrative conflicts described in the previous chapter. As it turns out, they argue, when Haḍimbā approached Krishna and complained about the deaths of her brother, husband and son, the god promised her that once she meditated and turned into a goddess, she would be worshipped as Kālī in the age of the Kaliyug.

What is fascinating and important to notice here is the way in which the same cultural icon—that of the legitimate yet violent goddess Kālī—enables the Sanskritization and pan-Indianization of the Dhungri goddess, while at the same time keeping her peripheral, located just on the border of mainstream Hinduism. Thus, while Haḍimbā is pulled towards the center on the one hand, her advance is checked on the other. She remains a powerful, yet borderline deity who could easily slip back across the line of legitimacy. Whereas in the eyes of locals, Haḍimbā is a most powerful goddess who is at the heart of culture, society and order, in the eyes of outsiders she is a peripheral deity, legitimate only up to a point, someone whose bloodthirstiness should not be accepted so lightly, if at all.

¹³⁹ Compare this with McDermott's somewhat similar experience in Bengal. After lecturing to local audience about Western conceptions of Kālī, McDermott realized that "most Bengalis do not view Kālī as a union of opposites, the worship of the dark side of whom will lead to spiritual transformation. Kālī is simply Ma, the all-compassionate Mother. If there is a part of the goddess which represents death, it is a part not readily noticed or emphasized by the majority of her votaries" (McDermott 1996: 383).

On-the-Ground Struggles: Photography

The tensions we have discussed so far, surrounding the meaning, ethical value, and the very right to perform the buffalo *bali*, have existed only in the realm of talk. People discuss the issue, argue about it, and sometimes even dismiss each other with scorn. So far, neither the state, nor anyone else for that matter, has tried to stop the performance of the ritual forcibly. This is not to say, however, that the debate is confined to the realm of discourse alone. Rituals, after all, are realms of embodied action, where presence and participation are tangible and real. Whereas locals and tourists visiting Haḍimbā's temple are yet to fight over this issue physically, the struggle between them does take an interesting embodied form. Enter photography.

Visiting tourists, despite their criticism of the animal sacrifice, are often quite fascinated by the bloody, unfamiliar practice. I recall how a tourist from Delhi, a young man in his mid-thirties, described with glittering eyes how in one of his early visits to Manali, he witnessed a sacrifice of a goat near the temple. Thinking I was a visiting tourist myself, he described the act with great fascination and admitted that it was only here that he got a chance to witness such a ritual firsthand. Such fascination, as I have mentioned above, is not new and goes back to as early as colonial times. Whereas Calvert expressed his intense feelings by painting the sacrificial scene he chanced upon, modern tourists capture the moment in technologically more advanced ways: they pull out their mobile phones and digital cameras and snap photos and videos of the event. As happens often in our digital age, the materials they produce are quickly uploaded to the internet and circulate and get out of control.

One cold winter day, during a chai-shop conversation with several villagers from Dhugnri, one of them kept asking me if I had prepared a 'CD' of the buffalo sacrifice.

Parasram,¹⁴⁰ one of my good friends from Dhungri, intervened immediately saying: “No No. He just took some pictures. No video!” Many months later, on my last day in the field, I sat down with Parasram in our favorite grove to bid farewell. Parasram, always cheerful and happy, was very serious. He warned me again and again that I should never make a video CD of the buffalo sacrifice, let alone sell it and make money off of it. The *mātā*, he said, is very powerful, and she would hurt me if I did. He warned me not to underestimate the powers of Haḍimbā, thinking she would not reach me once I am away from Manali. “She will!,” he assured me, and made me promise that I would not prepare such a CD.

Haḍimbā’s devotees, as I came to realize, have grown fully aware of the potential threat to their age-old customs posed by tourists in the digital age. In 2012, when I was already back in the U.S., the threat turned very real. The government took new measures against the performance of the sacrifice and Neel had no doubt what was the reason behind it:

Udi: Tell me, do people in Manali oppose the buffalo *bali* too? Saying it should end?

Neel: No no. The people of Manali do not say this. Actually, the problem is that when the sacrifice is going on, some people are capturing it on video. They upload it to the internet, so other people can see. These people say: ‘such sacrifice should not be performed. It should be stopped.’ Brother, these people do not know that ours is the abode of goddesses and gods and that in order to keep them happy we have to do this. The thing is that people who are not from here—city people, etc.—for them it is not a serious matter. They watch it and think: ‘These people are sacrificing [animals]. What is the point in that? There is no point in doing that.’ People are watching it on the internet, checking it. It is just like the video that was made on Manu *gur* and

¹⁴⁰ Parasram, a very colorful person and a father of three, is known in the village by his nickname ‘more-well.’ This is due to his habit of addressing foreign tourists explaining, in his very basic English, that everything around Manali is ‘more well’ than everywhere else. Parasram is a very helpful informant who has become a good friend.

Haḍimbā *gur*,¹⁴¹ [showing] their trance and dance [*deo khel* - locals oppose the filming of this practice]. They uploaded it to the internet too and all that people can see is this ‘chungā chungā chungā’ [Neel imitates the drumbeat that accompanies the dance, demonstrating how it is ridiculed when shown out of context]. This is a wrong thing to do, a wrong thing.

Udi: Yes. You are right. This is a wrong thing to do. But tell me, did people try and prevent this [the digital reproduction of the sacrifice]?

Neel: Sure. For the last three-four years there has been a great effort to prevent it. It is completely banned, so no one takes photos of [the sacrifice] anymore.

Attempts to prevent tourists from photographing the event were indeed taking place in Manali when I was conducting my field research there. Two guards, waving their big bamboo sticks (*lāṭhīs*), warned anyone who tried to snap a photo not to do so. The task, as one can imagine, was quite challenging, due to the ease of capturing the scene with simple mobile phones. Villagers, as they themselves admit, are rarely quick to police tourists’ behavior or even voice their resentment when the latter act inappropriately. In this case, however, villagers took a rather unusual stand and kept ordering visitors to lower their cameras. I myself was ordered to do so more than once, and needed to cash in on much of the social capital I had acquired during my stay in Manali to steal a photo or two.

As can be seen in Neel’s report, he fully grasps how the digital representations of the buffalo sacrifice and the uncontrolled circulation of these materials on the internet decontextualizes, sensationalizes and even ridicules it. Outsiders, who watch but tiny decontextualized fragments of the ritual on their computer screens or tiny mobile phone, have absolutely no knowledge about the cultural framework within which it is situated and cannot really comprehend it in its full complexity. What should be banned, locals seem to suggest, is not the buffalo sacrifice, but its digital reproduction and its careless

¹⁴¹ Nil is probably referring to a recent documentary by Anu Malhotra on shamans in the Kullu Valley (“Shamans of the Himalaya,” AIM Television PVT).

distribution. The forces of disorder, one could argue, like the buffalo demon in the myth, have taken up a new form. They are no longer embodied solely in the living beast, but also in the hordes of tourists, who are both fascinated and horrified by what they see. The problem for locals is that the latter are armed with our age's most powerful weapons: digital cameras and fast internet connections.

The Future?

Despite such pressures the buffalo *bali* has so far been performed without interference. Yet the state is moving closer. Here is what one of Haḍimbā's *pujārīs*, reported in an email on the mounting pressures posed by the state in 2012:

Tomorrow, an ashtang bali will be performed in the temple. The Govt. is putting up a lot of obstacles now and they forbid the performance of the sacrifice. The government did not allow the performance of a buffalo sacrifice in the Kamakhya temple in Mandi [a town three-hour drive away from Manali]. We don't know what will happen here. There is much tension.¹⁴²

The incident in Mandi, to which the *pujārī* relates in his email, took place on October 2011. Here is how the *Indian Express* reported it:

An ancient tradition, in which buffaloes were being killed at Kamakhya temple at Karsog in Mandi district, was put to an end for good on Wednesday. K K Sharma, Sub-divisional Magistrate of Karsog said, 'I have been trying to persuade the local temple management to stop the practice as it was brutal. The local Pradhan Mehar Singh Kukhari played a key role in motivating the people to stop the tradition.' What was alarming about the tradition Sharma says was the fact that the buffaloes brought from different places were made to die of injuries, instead of being slaughtered at one ago. 'It was very dangerous thing as the injured animal could kill several people in an attempt to escape death,' he said.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Email correspondence, July 16, 2012.

¹⁴³ <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/briefly-region:-pspcl-inks-two-more-deals-for-hydel-projects/856371/>, accessed on July 19, 2012.

Kishori Lal from Mandi, who reported the story about the ban enforced in Kāmākhyā Devī's temple on Webindia123.com, was much more dramatic:

For the first time since independence, no buffalo was slaughtered in sacrifice on the ninth Navratra this year following strict police vigil at the Kamaksha Devi Temple in the outskirts of Karsog, where the practice was prevalent. Deputy Commissioner Devesh Kumar and the Karsog Sub-divisional Magistrate K.K. Sharma said they had pledged to do away with the practice of shedding blood of the mute animals in the name of Goddess Durga and taken steps to prevent it. Additional force was called and deputed in the premises of the pristine temple to ensure that not a single animal was sacrificed by enforcing the provisions of law with an iron hand in the wake of reports that some orthodox elements were out to repeat the heinous practice of cruelty against animals by blatantly flouting the provisions of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, and several other laws of the land. The SDM Karsog, when contacted, claimed that not a single buffalo was allowed to be sacrificed on the day of sacred Sharad Navratra, on Wednesday for the first time this year in many centuries. It is a historic event, he acclaimed. The people of Karsog, the remotest sub-divisional town of Mandi district, were divided on the issue of buffalo sacrifices at Kamaksha Temple. The old, illiterate and orthodox people like Gorakh, Chhangu Ram and Jethu still reposed faith in the century old practice of animal sacrifices. According to them the sacrifices are offered to propitiate Goddess Kamakasha who protects and showers prosperity on the people of the valley.¹⁴⁴

Unlike Haḍimbā, Kāmākhyā Devī could not or did not want to stop the local SDM from preventing the sacrifice. In our phone conversation mentioned above, Neel too emphasized the role of the Sub-divisional Magistrate in the present case. Unlike his friend and relative Nil P.K. two years ago, who boasted how Haḍimbā had brought about the transfer of the SDM who wanted to put an end to the ritual, Neel used a totally different language when talking about the present situation:

Neel: Now I really don't know what will be the system tomorrow [what will happen]. Some say that a police force will arrive near the temple tomorrow. Some say that the SDM was asked about it and that he gave his permission to do it this time. [He said that] no police people would go up to the temple and that we could cut it [sacrifice the buffalo] as we have done every year. It

¹⁴⁴ <http://news.webindia123.com/news/Articles/India/20111006/1846475.html> , accessed on Oct. 6, 2011.

- seems to me unlikely that the police will come here. I don't think so. Maybe...
- Udi: But some people say that it could happen [that the police will stop the ritual]?
- Neel: This is what they say. But they also say that they have asked for permission and that the SDM said: 'brother, we will not come this year.'
- Udi: You mean that he said: 'Ok. We won't come this year, but don't do it again in the future'?
- Neel: About the future... he did not say that we shouldn't do it. But, about the future... I mean... Next year... We'll have to ask the *mātā* and see. Ask her what we should do, etc.
- Udi: I see.
- Neel: Because actually the *mātā* said we *shouldn't* do it. All the goddesses and gods convened here a few days ago and they said that Mātā Haḍimbā was angry [i.e. she needs to be pacified with a sacrifice]. The *mātā* herself rejected it outright. She said: 'I don't want it! I don't need such a sacrifice.' She said it very angrily. But then the other goddesses and gods came upon the people and said: 'This year there are going to be great difficulties. This thing will happen. That thing will happen. So then the *mātā* told all the people: 'You should give, then' (Neel, phone conversation, July 16, 2012).

The sacrifice has now become explicitly dependent on the SDM's permission. Though he finds it hard to believe, Neel nevertheless raises a real possibility that the SDM might send a police force to the temple to stop the performance of the ritual. It seems that the buffalo *bali* to the goddess Haḍimbā has never been so close to being shut down. In the following day, however, I learned that it was not. The *pujārī* emailed me again:

Today the program of the sacrifice in the temple went on very well. There was no interruption of the sacrifice. In many places around the temple posters were hung, saying that photography was prohibited. Not even one person took photos [of the event].¹⁴⁵

Despite this year's success, one can see that the stakes are high. Especially interesting was Neel's response to my suggestion that the SDM may not allow the performance of the ritual in the future and that this may be the last time it is performed.

¹⁴⁵ Email correspondence, July 17, 2012.

We should ask the *mātā*, he said, and quickly clarified that actually she herself opposed it at first. It was the other deities and the people who convinced her to approve it so the misfortunes lying ahead could be prevented. This is not the first time Haḍimbā has resisted the buffalo sacrifice. In 2011 I witnessed myself how her possessed *gur* communicated her reluctance. Haḍimbā said she did not want the sacrifice and added that she feared people would say that she has become “hungry.” Haḍimbā, it seems, is reluctant to become, or be considered greedy—her main accusation against her devotees. “I have given you so much,” she would often say, “and still, you are hungry.”

But this reluctance may signal something slightly different. In 2010, Haḍimbā insisted that instead of the buffalo sacrifice, a nine-day *pūjā* (*‘baṛā anuṣṭhān’* - ‘great ceremony,’ also called Durgā Pāṭh) should be performed in her temple. An elaborate function, the ceremony was overseen by a group of Brahman pundits, who were invited to the village especially for performing this novel celebration. In the following year, another big ceremony was performed in Old Manali village for the first time ever. An elaborate recitation of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, by pundits invited especially from Mandi, has taken place here for seven days. Villagers listened to the daily recitations and to the pundits’ lectures on appropriate religious conduct. Throughout the week, residents of Old Manali were required to renounce eating meat and avoid drinking alcohol. This ceremony, which took place just after I had left Manali, was, so I heard, a great success. Interestingly, the performance of this vegetarian ritual necessitated shifting the date of the buffalo *bali*, which was originally scheduled for the same time. The goddess was presented with the dilemma, and agreed that the sacrifice should be performed a couple of weeks earlier.

These two very recent innovations, combined with Haḍimbā's own reluctance to accept the Buffalo sacrifice, may signal that things are about to change in Manali. One could argue that devotees seek an honorable way out, which would enable them to renounce the buffalo sacrifice and avoid a clash with the police. If the trend of Brahmanized rituals continues, this could definitely be its outcome. But there are other options as well. For one, it could very well be that the struggle will continue, and that the sacrifice, which does not have to take place every year, will be avoided for several years until the pressure eases. It could also be that it will be performed secretly, in the forest, where the long arm of the law and the digital cameras of tourists are yet to reach. And it is also possible that villagers will decide to confront the state and insist on their right to maintain their culture and traditional customs and pursue their religion. In this case, physical clashes may be the result. Or perhaps the villagers themselves will change course and, trying to elevate their status and find themselves a more comfortable place at the Pan-Indian table, voluntarily renounce the buffalo and animal sacrifices altogether. Right now, this option seems rather unlikely, though it has already been taken by many in Manali, and may win more adherents as time progresses and pressures increase. Perhaps, in the long struggle between the *Devī* and the buffalo, the two will finally reach a truce. And maybe the buffalo has changed its form again, and in his many tricks has managed to temporarily hide from the *Devī's* wrath. No longer an archenemy that has to be defeated, he is now a helpless creature who needs to be saved.

Buffalo sacrifice to the goddess Haḍimbā is a central ritual that, as we have seen, can be read and interpreted in many different ways: a mechanism for upholding different forms of order—metaphysical, social, ethical, and even political; a model *of* and *for* reality, through which a particular historical reality is read and invested with relevant

contemporary meanings; and a ground for struggle for identity and agency and for the right to retain local tradition, beliefs and practices in the face of the advancing forces of the state, tourism and mainstream Hinduism. As we have seen, this struggle is still unfolding, and thus could potentially, if abolished, turn into a ground for accommodation as well. Haḍimbā may renounce this ritual and, like other goddesses in India, undergo a process of pacification and vegetarianization that moves her ideologically closer to the plains. While right now such a drastic transformation seems unlikely, Haḍimbā, we should recall, has done it before. As her devotees now believe, she was, after all, a forest *rākṣasī* who entered into alliance with princes from the plains. It could be that the process of Haḍimbā's de-demonization, which started in the mythic times of the Mahābhārata, will continue in historical time, and be completed at some point in the future. Of course, it could also be that it will not, and that Haḍimbā will retain her *rākṣasī* nature and taste for blood for many years to come.

CHAPTER THREE: Winter Comes in Summer, Summer Comes in Winter

Vidya [points to a nearby tree]: Look at these new leaves. It is autumn now [Hindi: *patjhar*], the time of falling leaves [Hindi: *pattā jharnā*, ‘falling leaves’], and yet new leaves are sprouting on this tree.

Udi: How can this be?

Vidya: That’s the way it is. It is the Kaliyug now, everything is upside down [*ulṭā*]...

Udi: But what about the gods? Don’t they have power? Why don’t they fix the weather?

Vidya: They fix.

Udi: But not completely, you mean?

Vidya: Yes. Only a little. They go to Bhagvān [Supreme God] and ask him to fix the weather. Sometimes he listens, but often he says: ‘look how much sin [*pāp*] there is in the world’ – and then he doesn’t listen. There are many people in the world, a lot of pollution – it is because of this [that the climate is changing].

Udi: And what about global warming? Do people talk about it?

Vidya: Very few. People here are uneducated. They don’t know much about it. But yes, this has an effect too (Vidya, Old Manali, Septmeber 26, 2010, note b).

Introduction: Climate Change

The notions expressed in the conversation quoted above—between me and Vidya, my landlady in Old Manali village—are a response to the fascinating developments that have taken place in the Kullu Valley in the past two decades. Dramatic climatic irregularities have coincided with far-reaching socio-economic transformations, and this concurrence has informed much of local people’s understanding of and engagement with both these phenomena. In what follows I present a number of rituals that are performed in the valley with the aim of “fixing” (*thīk karnā*) the weather and I investigate the high credibility that they enjoy. I focus on the important role played in these rituals by the goddess Haḍimbā. I then examine the ways in which locals talk about and interpret the recent climatic change and show how their religious worldview and moral values inform their ideas in this regard. In doing so, I concentrate on two major themes: (1) the ways in

which villagers associate the weather irregularities with the socio-economic transformations that have taken place in their lives, thus investing both these phenomena with meaning; and (2) the ways in which their interpretations reveal creeping doubts concerning the validity of the basic worldview that has prevailed in Kullu for centuries. I conclude by examining two weather-control possession rituals performed in the region in the past two decades (in 1996 and 2010), which illustrate both the continuities and shifts in locals' perceptions.

Vidya: I do not remember such a rainy season. It is raining and raining all the time. It started in May and it hasn't stopped since. Usually we get a few rainy days and then the sun comes out, but now it rains all the time. It is supposed to be the time of cutting and drying grass now [as winter food for the cows]. But how will they dry the grass now? So the people don't even bother picking it. It is going to be a huge problem. The weather here, it has gone upside-down [*ulṭā*]. It is cold in summer and hot in winter. I guess there will be no snow this year. If the summer was so cold, then the winter will most likely be warm. It has all turned over. It is all upside-down (Vidya, Old Manali, September 14, 2010, note 1).

Until about two decades ago the weather in Kullu Valley was relatively stable and followed regular patterns. It is true that forecasting the course of the daily weather was, and still is, a rather tricky business—a local proverb proclaims that 'the weather in Kullu and the fashion in Mumbai have something in common: they both change in a split second!' Yet predicting the yearly cycle was a relatively easy task. Neel summarized the past situation as follows:

Once we knew exactly how it [the weather] is going to be—in this month it is going to be like this, and on that month like that. We had five to five and a half months of snow, from around October to mid-April. Then, from May to July it was sunny, August was rainy, and September was half rainy and half sunny, and also quite cold (Neel, Manali Market, September 28, 2010, note b).

Accounts such as this are provided by other villagers as well and are supported by the findings of scholars working in the area. Vedwan and Rhoads, who studied climatic

changes in the region from 1962 -1996, observe that “the traditional calendar of local Kullu Valley farmers represents ideal types or pristine, undisturbed climates” (Vedwan and Rhoades 2001: 111). This ideal climatic situation, however, has changed dramatically over the past two decades or so. Practically everyone in Old Manali feels that something has gone fundamentally wrong with the weather. So too do government agricultural scientists working in the Kullu Valley who speak of a climatic change, or at least, an increased variability in the weather.¹⁴⁶

First, the climate is warming up. A study conducted by a Palampur-based agriculture university argues that in the apple belt, comprising Kinnaur, Simla and Kullu districts, “the last three decades have seen a steady rise in temperatures, varying between 0.3 to 1.7 degree Celsius.” The expert conducting the study argues that compared with other regions, the “temperature increase in Kullu district has been drastic in the past 25 years” (Bodh 2009).

Second, there has been a drastic decrease in snowfall. Arriving in Manali in 2009 I met Prem (Parmanand), Neel’s elder brother and a good friend whom I have also known for years. Updating me about what had happened in his life during the several years that we had not met—which also included news about the birth of his second child—Prem was anxious to report that in the previous winter, for the first time ever, it didn’t snow in Manali at all. Locals nostalgically recall the excessive snowfall of older times—“it could have snowed two and a half feet overnight. People were worried that their house would collapse” (villager, Old Manali, July 21, 2009, note h)—and lament its decline: “There

¹⁴⁶ This observation was made by several key government agricultural scientists engaged in research in the Kullu Valley who were interviewed by Vedwan and Rhoades (Vedwan and Rhoades 2001: 111). Jangra and Sharma reach the same conclusions: “due to global warming, both the minimum and maximum temperatures are rising at the local level and the same is true in the case of Kullu valley of Himachal Pradesh” (Jangra and Sharma 2010: 288).

used to be so much snow on our roof back then. Now there's nothing. People used to stock materials and food to last for six months. Now nothing!" (Sukharam, Old Manali, January 24, 2010, note 1). This process is apparent throughout the valley: "in older times it used to snow even in Mandi, but then it stopped. Then it stopped snowing in Kullu, and then in Nagar. Here too it did not snow at all this year" (elderly villager, Old Manali, July 21, 2009, note h). The snow line slowly climbs higher and higher up the valley. These observations are supported by scientists, who observe that over Himachal Pradesh "snowfall decline in recent decades is significant" (Jangra and Sharma 2010: 287).

Third, the climate change is also characterized by increased weather irregularities. Chaman—in his thirties, a resident of Old Manali who became a close friend with whom I spent endless hours discussing almost every aspect of life and religion in the area—described the growing instability of the weather patterns in recent years:

Chaman: When I was a child we began to see the snow at the end of December and it remained [on the ground] until the end of March. You could still easily find snow at Manali by the end of March. But now, the snow falls sometimes in February, sometimes in March, sometimes in January. It is no longer fixed (Chaman, Old Manali, September 21, 2010, note 1).

The same is true for rain patterns, which have also suffered extensive irregularities. Thus, for example, while 2009 had witnessed "a shortfall of 59% in pre-monsoon rains" (2009), 2010 was the rainiest year anyone could remember. It rained nonstop for well over a month.

If there's no snow, we will die of hunger.... There will be no apples, no tourists. Then we will have no money, and we will die of hunger.... Snow is necessary for apples.... For tourists too, they come to see the snow (Kimi and Sunita, near Haḍimbā temple, December 23, 2009, note 4).

The negative impact of the changing climate is deep and wide. The rising temperatures harm important natural resources, such as glaciers—an important source of

water supply in the region.¹⁴⁷ Excessive and irregular rains sometimes lead to cloudbursts—a sudden and a rather aggressive rainstorm that causes extreme precipitation in a fairly short span of time—and floods.¹⁴⁸ Villagers are especially worried about the negative effects on agriculture: “First and foremost it harms the crops. I mean, it damages all the crops. When you need rain you get sun, when you need sun you get rain” (Neel, Manali Market, September 28, 2010, note b). The decrease in snow, whose gradual melting normally guarantees an effective watering of the plants, also reduces productivity, and the untimely rains disturb the harvesting of various crops and the cutting and drying of grass—the main ingredient in cows’ diet.

However, as can be gathered from Vidya’s remarks in September, the gravest threat posed by the climatic change lies elsewhere. Kimi and Sunita are much less concerned about how the weather changes affect the traditional subsistence economy than they are about the threat it poses to the two pillars of the new cash economy, namely apple cultivation and tourism. The rising temperatures are especially harmful to apples, whose cultivation requires cold weather conditions. In April 2009 *The Times of India*, in an article, titled “Global Warming Shrinks Apple Belt,” reported that the steady rise in temperatures in the Kullu Valley over the past three decades has “brought down the

¹⁴⁷ “Currently global warming has become a serious threat to the glaciers. Less snowfall and less snow deposits due to global warming are causing the glaciers to recede, as a result the water resources in the Himalaya are declining” (Kuniyal 2004: 51).

¹⁴⁸ “Short, concentrated spells of high intensity rain during the rainy season in 1994, created terror amongst residents of flood prone areas in Himachal Pradesh.... The entire state in general, and Kullu district in particular, was badly hit by the abnormal rains. In Phojal, a place located between Kullu and Manali towns, the cloudburst incidence took place twice in 1994. Here 11 lives were lost along with damage to 21 khokhas (temporary stalls), 5 water mills, 3 vehicles and 4-5 ha of agro-horticultural trees” (Kuniyal 2004: 121-22).

chilling hours, required for a good crop, from 1200 hours to 800.”¹⁴⁹ The lack of rains that year gave an additional blow to productivity and in July, the newspapers predicted that apple production in the state was “expected to fall to 1.80 *crore* [180 million] boxes as against the normal of 3.2 *crore* [320 million] boxes.”¹⁵⁰ In 2010 the valley faced the opposite problem: untimely heavy rains in April ruined the fledgling flowers, prevented pollination, and resulted again in low yields.¹⁵¹

The decrease in snowfall and the rainfall fluctuations have had a disturbing effect on tourism as well. In fact, the state’s climate has been instrumental in shaping H.P.’s tourism industry from the very beginning. It was the cool and healthy weather experienced here by British soldiers during the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814-15) that motivated them to establish here the famous hill stations that would serve as their recreational destinations.¹⁵² The decrease in snowfall not only threatens the local ski industry, but also reduces the appeal of the region in the eyes of domestic tourists for whom the snow is a major attraction. Heavy rains pose another set of problems. Not only do they severely restrict outdoor activities—the central aspect of a tourist’s visit—but they sometimes prevent visitors from ever reaching the area. Landslides, traffic jams and collapsing roads discourage many from even trying. Backpacker tourism is also affected,

¹⁴⁹ Bodh (2009). The newspaper reports about similar problems again in the following year: “The bad climatic change in Himalayan region due to global warming has resulted in less rain and snowfall. The apple farmers and other fruit growers have suffered financial loss... The farmers have been praying for heavy snowfall, which would fulfill the chilling hours required for apple and other fruits grown in the region” ANI (2010).

¹⁵⁰ Network (2009)

¹⁵¹ Vedwan and Rhoades note that “the present-day low productivity crisis first appeared in the year 1989–1990, when the valley production hit an all time low—a 50% reduction from the previous all-time-high year. Production, while experiencing some seasonal fluctuations, has not recuperated fully and an overall decline continues” (Vedwan and Rhoades 2001: 110).

¹⁵² For a discussion of the importance of the weather to local tourism in Himachal see Jreat (2004: 88-89)

as happened in 2010 when the ongoing rains drastically reduced the number of travelers arriving in Old Manali, making it one of the least successful tourist seasons in years. Neel succinctly explained the implications of this situation:

Look, the rain has ruined the roads. Many tourists got stuck on the way. They never arrived. Today most of the people here depend on tourism: hotels, car rentals, photographers, everyone. What will they do? In every house you've got someone who is dependent on tourism for a living.¹⁵³

Lastly, the changing weather patterns also affect religious festivals and reduce the opportunities for the oral transmission of culture. In the winter of 2009, for example, during the local Phāglī festival—an eleven-day affair that involves outdoor communal rituals, indoor family gatherings, extensive feasts, rivers of alcohol, and lots and lots of singing—people kept noting how everything used to be so much nicer in older times, when the celebrations were bedecked in heavy white snow. “We just need the snow,” a young villager plainly explained, “it is simply necessary!” (Puran, near Manu temple, December 6, 2010, note b). Villagers nostalgically recalled the long winter months of the past, when family members used to gather around the kitchen fire, spin wool and tell stories:

In older times there was much snow here...people used to burn wood. They had only one room. They slept there and they ate there. They drank there [too]... In the night, what did these people do? They used to tell stories. There was no TV, no light, no nothing (Vidya, Old Manali, January, 23, 2010, note 2).

Weather-Control Rituals: The Holistic Paradigm¹⁵⁴

Udi: Who controls the weather around here?

¹⁵³ Neel, Manali market, September 28, 2010, note b. Similar conditions prevailed here in previous years as well: “Floods, road cuttings, blockades and casualties due to road slips in 1996 resulted in an approximately 30% fall in tourist inflow” (Kuniyal 2004: 122).

¹⁵⁴ I use the word ‘holistic’ to characterize a system whose parts are intimately interconnected, interdependent and constantly affect each other, as well as the whole they make.

Chaman: The goddesses and gods [*Devī-Devṭā*]. But basically it is natural. I mean, if you have a little problem then you ask the gods to solve the problem.... Whenever people in the village want rain they go to [goddess] Haḍimbā. They plead with her and do all kinds of things [rituals]. Then Haḍimbā gives them several options – ‘you should go there, you should do that....’ Then we get the rain. If we want sun, then we get sun (Chaman, Old Manali, September 21, 2010, note 1).

Elder from Old Manali: In older times we used to ask for rains and the gods would comply in no more than three to five days!¹⁵⁵

Cosmological configurations in India, in which divine beings, natural phenomena, and human beings are interlinked through ritual action, are quite old. Already in the Vedas specific deities were believed to be in charge of different meteorological phenomena such as rain and storm (Indra), and wind (Vāyu). Human ritual action was perceived as no less instrumental in maintaining the natural order of things and the proper advance of the annual climatic cycle. Jamison and Witzel discuss the early Vedic notion of reciprocity, according to which rain and human ritual actions were closely interlinked. According to the Vedas, they write, “heavenly water falls as rain to earth, produces plants (which are eaten by animals); both plant and animal products are offered at the ritual and thus ascend to heaven in the smoke of the offering fire, to become rain again” (Jamison and Witzel 2003: 98). The principle underlying this cyclical economy was further conceptualized as *ṛta*, or the “regulative principle of the natural order...the power of natural law that causes the rains to fall, the rivers to flow, and the sun to send forth its light” (Holdrege 2004: 215). Humans’ role in maintaining the *ṛta* was expressed in the notion of dharma, which was “used to refer to the ‘upholding of *ṛta*’ (*ṛtasya dharman*)

¹⁵⁵ Elderly person, Old Manali, January 26, 2010, note 1. Others in the region expressed similar views on numerous occasions.

(Ṛg Veda 9.7.1, 9.110.4) and in its plural form designates more specifically the ordinances and sacrificial rituals that maintain the cosmic order” (Holdrege 2004: 216).

In classical texts, it was the duty of the king to uphold the natural order and guarantee fertility and rains. As the protector of Dharma, the king performed annual rituals whose purpose was to regulate the rains, secure the land during the “dark” monsoon months, and reconstitute the cosmos, society and kingdom, once the rainy season was over.¹⁵⁶ The maintenance of the proper advance of the natural order and timely weather, however, was not exclusively the role of the king. Elaborate sets of calendric rites were developed, which aimed at upholding annual climatic cycles and guaranteed their proper progression. Such agro-rituals, as Vasavi calls them, are still performed in India today. Having carefully studied them in contemporary rural Karnataka, he argues that they “mark specific climatic and agricultural phases...and are based on a correspondence between the climatic cycles, agricultural conditions, and social activities” (Vasavi 1999: 30). Performed during festivals, these rituals “mark the seasons through specific botanical items and synchronize ecological conditions and agricultural activities to an agrarian social and ritual life.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Inden (1998). Inden provides here a detailed analysis of the royal *abhiṣeka* (‘affusion’ into kingship) ritual—“the most important of the ‘royal rituals’ (rāja-karma) in early medieval India” (Inden 1998: 53). He argues that the king performed these recurring rites in order “to regulate the rains and to prevent society from being overwhelmed by demons, enemies, flood, famine, and disease during the anxiety-laden night of the rainy season. Towards the end of the monsoon, he performed several rituals of the ‘lustration’ or *nīrājanā* type, the early medieval forerunners of the later Navarātrī, Dasarā, and Divālī festivals. These had as their objective the renewal and reconstitution of cosmos, society, and kingdom” (Inden 1998: 82). Similar rituals are still performed in India today, as will become clear from my discussion of Vasavi’s work below.

¹⁵⁷ Vasavi (1999: 30). Catherine Bell discusses the universal nature of such rituals, which she subsumes under the larger category of calendrical rituals. She observes that “like rites of passage, calendrical rites can be said to impose cultural schemes on the order of nature. These cultural schemes may attempt to influence or control nature, as when rites address the amount of rain or the fertility of the land, or they might simply try to harmonize the activities and attitudes of the human community with the seasonal rhythms of the environment and the larger cosmos. In both cases, they constitute working interpretations of the natural and social worlds” (Bell 1997: 103).

Interestingly it is on those occasions when the normal seasonal order is breached—most conspicuously in times of drought—that the underlying logic of the system is best revealed.

The cosmological construction of droughts places human actions, natural conditions, and divine ordination in a homological and analogical paradigm. People consider actions that have transpired in one domain to have implications in another. Human actions that negate or defy moral values and codes are considered to entail divine retribution... Just as the classical Hindu texts stipulated a fundamental association between rain and law... agrarian cultural constructions see a nexus between drought and the ethical life of the community (Vasavi 1999: 55).

This tendency of Indian agriculturalists to understand natural phenomena as intimately bound with human moral behavior has been noted by other anthropologists working in India as well. Thus, for example, Srinivas reports how residents of Rampura village (near Mysor Karnataka) speculated that a prolonged drought was caused by the fact that a certain “dead man, who had suffered from leucoderma during his lifetime, had been buried instead of being exposed to vultures” (Srinivas 1976: 120). The burial, which defiled the earth, breached the moral order and resulted in the halting of rains. Ann Gold, to take another example, reports that in Ghatiyali (Rajasthan), years of inadequate monsoon rains were attributed to deforestation, as well as to divine anger, brought about by all sorts of immoral human behaviors: “lack of compassion, insolence towards elders and caste superiors, decline of community life involving disrespect for common property (including trees), and increasing indifference toward proper celebration of collective rituals” (Gold 1998: 174).

It is in times like these, when the normal climatic order is compromised, that corrective rituals should be performed in order to appease the gods and to collectively reestablish the moral, social and cosmological order. In Rajasthan, for example, Gold

reports on a specific ritual that was performed when the late monsoon failed for a second year in succession. Villagers, having collected the required funds, performed the Inder (Indra) *pūjā*, in which they addressed the Vedic rain god Indra, petitioning him to end the drought. Mantras were chanted by a young Brahman boy and *ghī* was poured into the fire. Water was sprinkled over a pile of stones representing Inder, in a sort of a sympathetic magic, and an empty pitcher was placed before him so he could fill it up with rain. Jaipalji, a local deity who was also addressed in the ritual, was promised that his temple would be beautified if indeed the rain arrives promptly. The consequent failure of the ritual—the sky remained clear—was attributed by villagers to a certain disrespectful gesture exhibited during the performance and to the general moral decline characterizing the present age.¹⁵⁸ Feldhaus, to take another example, reports how in time of drought Maharashtrian men would “carry water from a river to a local Śiva temple and fill the temple sanctuary with the water until the Śivaliṅga becomes submerged” (Feldhaus 1995: 29). By doing so, villagers hope to induce rain by “making an explicit use of the analogy between Śiva and mountains and of that between rivers and rainwater.” Pouring river water on *liṅgas*—which just like Śiva are associated with mountains—is analogous to the natural process in which vaporized water rain on mountains and then flow down to the plains again as rivers. The purifying power often ascribed to river-water in India could indicate that this ritual also attempts to reestablish the orderly climatic cycle by washing away all sorts of impurities caused by immoral behaviors and sins. In both these cases, then, the underlying logic of the agrarian

¹⁵⁸ Gold (1988: 53-56). Gold notes that the Inder *pūjā* was only one in a series of ritual undertakings seeking to bring forth the desired rains. These included singing religious songs (bhajans), sacrificing a scapegoat, and consulting a range of oracles and deities. It should be noted that though addressing the Vedic god Indra—whose stature in India has declined dramatically since Vedic times—the *pūjā* described here is not a Vedic ritual, nor does it rely on Vedic texts in any particular way.

worldview comes into light: divine powers, climatic conditions, and human moral behavior and ritual action, are all interconnected and constitute different aspects of a comprehensive holistic ecology.¹⁵⁹

A certain demon [*dānav*] wreaked great havoc across this peaceful mountainous land. The local gods [*devtās*] killed all his companions but were unsuccessful in their attempts to kill the chief demon himself. So Śiva killed him with a strike of his mace. This demon was called Kulānt. It is believed that it is after this demon that Kullu is called ‘the seat of Kulānt’ (*kulāntpīṭh*). Having killed the demon, Lord Śiva freed the people from his atrocities. In order to guarantee that this evil power is never restored, Śiva again and again strikes the earth with heavenly lightning. However, to make sure this lightning does not harm any other places, Śiva contains [the lightning] with his own *piṇḍī* [aniconic form of a divine being, Śivaliṅga-like rock in this case]. Thus, the lightening strikes Śiva’s *piṇḍī* in Mathāṇ [the hill located at the confluence of the Beas and Parvati rivers, near the town of Kullu] again and again. This is why Śiva is called here Bijlī Mahādev (The Great Lord of Lightning.) When the *piṇḍī* of Bijlī Mahādev is struck by this heavenly lightning, it smashes into pieces. Then, a ceremony is held, in which the broken pieces are joined together with butter [*makkhan*]. In but a few days the *piṇḍī* is transformed back into its original undivided solid form.¹⁶⁰

Bijlī Mahādev, or the Śiva of Lightning, is one of Kullu’s most prominent gods. His temple is located on the top of the Mathāṇ hill, which stands at the gates of the valley. In the midst of a large grazing ground and right at the summit of the mountain, Bijlī Mahādev’s *piṇḍī* is believed to be periodically struck by lightning and to smash into pieces as a result. The officiating priest is said to then seal the temple and glue the broken pieces together with butter until the *piṇḍī* is miraculously restored to its solid form the following day. Whereas I have not yet met anyone who actually witnessed the *piṇḍī* smashes or the subsequent restoration ritual, everyone in Manali assured me that this was

¹⁵⁹ Surprisingly, while rites of weather-control seem to be quite central to village ritual life in India, discussions of such rituals are practically absent from most of the Introduction to Hinduism textbooks available today.

¹⁶⁰ Vashishtha (1996: 97). My translation.

indeed the case.¹⁶¹ Bijlī Mahādev’s ability to periodically absorb particularly destructive lightning with his *piṇḍī*, is common knowledge in the valley, as well as the ensuing restoration ritual that is performed by his priests with butter. Whether this event actually takes place or not, the story nicely captures the holistic ecology we have discussed above, according to which divinities, natural weather cycles and human moral and ritual actions are closely interlinked.

Given Bijlī Mahādev’s strategic location above the entrance to the valley, one is tempted to think of his story as setting the overarching framework for the region’s engagement with weather. The great god is believed to both generate and subdue the lightning, an awe-inspiring meteorological phenomena that secures life in the valley while, at the same time, holding a great potential to destroy it. Whereas the lightning protects life by striking the earth and thereby subduing potential malign forces, other meteorological phenomena, such as rain and snow, protect life by nourishing the land, thereby securing its fertility. Furthermore, just as the lightning can also destroy life in the region, unless it is checked by divine intervention, so do the rains and snow if they come in excess or do not come at all. Śiva can contain the destructive power of the lightning by absorbing it in his *piṇḍī*—a sacred object that mediates between heaven and earth—only that by doing so the *piṇḍī* exhausts its protective powers and needs to be restored. It is exactly at this point that humans’ intervention becomes indispensable: they need to ritually reconstruct the *piṇḍī*, lest it would lose its protective capacities and the valley would once again face a grave danger. In exactly the same way, in times of harmful

¹⁶¹ This is not to say that it doesn’t. Given the exceptionally elevated location of this temple I would not be surprised if it does occasionally get struck by lightning. Since the *piṇḍī* in the temple is always covered with a thick layer of butter, one can also imagine how the above-mentioned secretive ritual could unfold.

meteorological conditions, such as irregular rains or drought, humans need to perform weather-correcting rituals and thus play their role in upholding the normal climatic cycle.

In the broadest sense, this myth illustrates how divine powers and human agents collaborate, through ritual action, in controlling and regulating the weather. Interestingly, we should note, the myth does not make cosmic or even universal claims. Bijlī Mahādev is a local deity enshrined in a particular temple on a top of a specific hill. He does not save the whole universe, or even the world, but just the Kullu Valley and its inhabitants. Both the destructive and generative powers in this myth are deeply rooted in the locality and are maintained by those agents, divine as well as human, who reside in it.¹⁶²

While all the goddesses and gods in the Kullu Valley are believed to have some control over the weather, a certain degree of ‘professionalism’ does exist. For example, serpent (*nāg* or *nāgā*) gods are believed to possess a special influence over rains,¹⁶³ and so do *joginīs* - female deities who need to be pacified and settled down in specific locations, lest they roam freely in the valley and generate extensive rainstorms. Sāgū, to take another example, is a local demon-deity who resides in the upper part of the valley and is believed to be stirring strong and violent winds whenever he blows out air with his lips. Others believe that Ghaṭotkaca, the goddess Haḍimbā’s son, who is worshiped in Dhungri village and in other places in the region, also commands such wind-related powers:

¹⁶² One could argue, of course, that using the generic Mahādev to designate this deity is, after all, to connect him to the cosmic, translocal Śiva, which would make this god much less local and more universal than I present him to be. Yet when discussing Bijlī Mahādev villagers tended to focus on his local qualities—his elevated temple, his considerably large palanquin, his special role in the local Daśahrā festival, etc.—rather than on any cosmic aspect. Apart from his name, I did not come across any attempt to relate him to the pan-Indian god in any significant way.

¹⁶³ Vogel, in a publication from 1926, discusses the weather-related functions of *nāgā* gods in the Kullu Valley and its neighboring areas. He observes that many of these *nāgā* gods were ancient serpent-demons who later developed into “weather-godlings” (Vogel 1972: 268).

Shivkumar [one of Haḍimbā's *pujārīs*]: Many believe in Ghaṭotkaca around here. That he can stop the wind. He is very powerful. If he does 'phuu' [with his lips] then the wind will blow. If he is angry, nobody can stop him, and it will also rain a lot. This is because he controls the wind and the storm [*tūfān*]. When a storm is coming, he can stop it. He is the one creating it, so he can also put a stop to it. He has a lot of power in that department (Shivkumar, Haḍimbā temple, September 27, 2010, note d).

A host of rituals are employed in the Kullu Valley in times of weather irregularities. Lack or excess of rain, absence of snow and recurring floods, can all be addressed by a number of ritual procedures. The simplest among them is that of *deo pūchnā*—consultation with the divine—sometimes referred to simply as *pūchnā*, or *pūchpaṇī* – to ask a question.

As we have already seen, the majority of goddesses and gods in the region are represented and communicated by special human mediums called *gurs* (*gurus*,” teachers of the people), or *celās* (disciples,” of the gods). These mediums are believed to be chosen by the deities themselves, in a process called *gur nikalnā* (the emergence, or unveiling, of a medium) that often takes place during a village festival following the death of a the previous medium. The designated *gur*, usually a person of a low-caste status who may have not been identified up until that point, would get possessed and have his cap (*topī*) knocked down by the shafts of the deity’s palanquin (*rath*), which is carried on devotees’ shoulders throughout the festival. Once thus approved by the deity, the new medium undergoes an initiation ceremony—a sort of a funeral rite that marks his symbolic death as an ordinary person and subsequent rebirth as *gur*—after which he grows his hair long and becomes the official mouthpiece of the deity.¹⁶⁴ From then on he

¹⁶⁴ On *gurs*, see Berti (2001: 87-101).

is summoned by villagers on different occasions to perform consultations regarding a host of private and public affairs, including weather conditions.

Consultations regarding meteorological aberrations often take place in the temple. The *gur*, wearing his traditional white dress (*colā*), inhales the smoke of the burning juniper placed in front of him in the deity's censer, plucks a few hair locks and, engulfed by the sound of beating drums, begins to shake. Once he is possessed, a dialogue ensues between him and the "public"—the deity's officiating functionaries, village elders, and other curious onlookers. The consultation is usually led by the *kārdār*, the administrator of the deity, who asks the questions and petitions him or her to 'fix' the weather. Other devotees also chime in occasionally, with comments and related requests. Occasionally, different sorts of ritual mechanism would be employed during the consultation to confirm the reliability of the *gur*, as well as the faith of the devotees.¹⁶⁵ Eventually, the deity declares what needs to be done in order for the weather to return to normal. This would often entail a performance of a more elaborate ritual, such as *yāg* (Skt. *yajña*, a ritual conducted by officiating Brahmin that includes the offering of oblations into fire).¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Such rituals include the *ole pogle* (round stone) ritual, where the *gur*'s authenticity is tested by making him choose one of three stones placed in front of him with the deity's bell he is holding in his hand. Each of the stones is secretly ascribed with a different meaning by the consulting person. If the *gur* chooses the proper stone then the authenticity of his possession is confirmed. In other occasions the *gur* would confirm the faith of the devotee by handing him a random number of rice grains from a pile. The devotee counts the grains and if the number is odd his faith is confirmed. Both these methods, together with a third one, *moloḥī*, in which balls made of cow dung are immersed in water until one of them surfaces, are also used as mechanisms for answering individual questions and help in decision making. See Berti (2001: 103-28).

¹⁶⁶ The centrality of the *pūchnā* mechanism to local Pahari culture is recognized by other scholars working in the region as well. Sutherland, for example, notes that "in consultations such as these, Pahari deities intervene in everyday life in order to determine the best course of action to take in all kinds of affairs...deotās [local deities] diagnose misfortune, heal sickness, welcome brides...select new temple officials, formulate group policy, distribute grazing and irrigation rights...control the weather (Nags in particular have power over rain), ensure the fertility of crops and flocks, protect against demonic disorder, maintain the presence of life-giving śakti in their domains, and predict the course of the coming year" (Sutherland 2006: 101).

Yāg can be performed for both private and public reasons. When weather issues are concerned the *yāg* takes place in the temple, with the presence of several *gurs*¹⁶⁷ and officiating Brahmins (*purohits*), who, in the case of Old Manali, are invited from outside the village. The rite involves elaborate procedures, such as constructing a sacrificial area; drawing geometric designs that represent different deities with rice and decorating them with sacred grains and red threads; chanting mantras and counting rosary beads; and pouring oblations into the fire while repeatedly chanting “*svāhā*.”¹⁶⁸ The funds for this rite, required for purchasing the necessary ingredients and paying the *purohits*’ (Brahmin priests’) fees, are collected from all the villagers by special committee members. At the end of the process the *gur* gets into trance and another *pūchnā* is performed. The deity then announces whether the *yāg* was successful and if so, when should the weather conditions improve.¹⁶⁹

At other times—depending on the identity of the deity addressed, the nature of the weather irregularity and the exact instructions given by the gods on how to address the problem—locals may be required to perform animal sacrifice (*bali*) instead of *yāg*. Animal sacrifice, as we have seen in the previous chapter, figures prominently in the Kullu religion. The following story reveals an interesting association between sacrifice and weather conditions:

Manu also got married...with a girl named Manālī.... There was no rain, so the people said: “sacrifice her and the rain will come!” These were the *rākṣas* log

¹⁶⁷ Villages in the Kullu Valley often have more than one deity. Not all the deities have temples and they could be worshiped in small shrines or sacred grounds. When a *yāg* is performed in honor of the village’s main deity, the *gurs* of the other smaller deities are also present and participate in the consultation.

¹⁶⁸ Young and less knowledgeable villagers like to relate to this rite simply by this word: “*svāhā*.” The mantra is repeated numerous times throughout the ceremony and leaves a strong impression on observers.

¹⁶⁹ This description is based on my own observations, supplemented by those of Berti (2001: 131-61).

[demons] In older times there were two parties. Just like today there are two parties. One is of *āstikas* [theist], who believe in the goddesses and gods. But there are *nāstikas* as well [atheist], who say “what is this thing? Goddesses and gods do not exist!” In older times it was just the same. At that time the *nāstikas* were called *rākṣasas*... So Manālī was sacrificed. The *rākṣasas* cut her and sacrificed her, because their balance increased They grew very powerful. This is why they sacrificed her. If Manu had more power, than he would have said “Friend [*yār*], don’t cut her, cut some goat, cut something else” But the *rākṣasas* said “you should cut her. If you cut her then the rain will definitely come. This is a sure thing!” Now Manālī, she was superior to ordinary people. Just as our Lord [Bhagvān, identified with god Manu Ṛṣi in this case] is superior, so was Manālī, his wife. And she said “if this brings blessing to the public, if the public really needs this, if this can bring the rain, so cut me then!” So then he sacrificed her, and it rained (Lalchand, Haḍimbā temple, January 10, 2011, note 1).

Interestingly, and as previously mentioned, Manu Ṛṣi, the chief deity of Old Manali, is never offered blood sacrifices himself. Like several other gods in the region who are identified with ancient Vedic seers, as we have seen Manu is considered a vegetarian deity who does not approve of blood offerings. Nevertheless, as can be seen in the above story, when it comes to pacifying the weather, Manu himself is willing to perform this bloody act and sacrifice his very own wife. The story, which was related to me by Lalchand, one of Haḍimbā’s priests, is not well known among other devotees. It nevertheless reveals what is widely acknowledged in the region: blood sacrifice is often necessary for the maintenance of cosmic order and of favorable weather conditions in particular. Thus, for example, members of the Taxi Union in Manali, whose work entails frequent rides to Rohtang Pass at the Northern tip of the valley, perform an annual goat sacrifice aimed at pacifying the demonic deity Sāgū, who is believed to be responsible for many of the winds and storms in that area.¹⁷⁰ This association, of animal sacrifice with

¹⁷⁰ Sāgū’s exact identity is hard to trace. Some identify him with Haḍimbā’s demonic brother Haḍimb, while others argue this cannot really be the case since Haḍimb is long dead. Others admit that there is indeed a great confusion about his true identity. In any case, it is clear that Sāgū is a wind-related deity of a strong demonic background.

weather conditions, is so strong that it makes its way to local humor as well. One day, while walking in the village, I ran into one of the local *gurs*, with whom I used to have occasional brief exchanges. I commented about the rainy weather and noted that it had been pouring nonstop for over twelve hours. The *gur* started laughing and said this was the result of a sheep offering given to Pātāl Devtā the previous evening (Pātāl Devtā is enshrined under a small tree in the upper part of the village). Returning the joke, I then replied that it may be a high time to sacrifice another sheep so the rain would stop. The several elders present started laughing and confirmed that I indeed had hit on the correct logic. Animal sacrifice in the Kullu Valley, so I learned, is regarded as having the power to manipulate the weather both in serious ritual settings and in casual afternoon jests.

We have seen before that similar views, concerning the importance of animal sacrifice for the maintenance of favorable weather conditions, can be found in other parts of H.P. as well. Mark Elmore reports how the government ban on animal sacrifice in the Simla District put an end to an age-old custom of offering blood sacrifices to goddess Bhīmākālī in the village of Sarhan. The temple has recently become an important destination on a state pilgrimage tourism circuit and the tourists, critical of the bloody act, began to complain. In response, the government prohibited the performance of such sacrifices within the temple complex, a decision that came as a huge shock to devotees. When subsequently a prolonged drought broke out in the region, the villagers had no doubt that this was the goddess' revenge for the deprivation of the sacrifice. One of Elmore's informants summarized the situation as follows:

[T]he local people think that animal sacrifice must be performed. Now that here [in the temple] sacrifice is prohibited, they go outside. They go to the hills and do the sacrifice... They ask the goddess to bring rain. They are farmers. How can farmers be successful (*suphal*, fertile, profitable) without rain and how will they

fill the bellies of their families if they are not successful? For this reason, they continue to do sacrifice outside the temple (Elmore 2005: 498).

When all such ritual mechanisms fail, there are yet other, more extreme procedures that can still be employed. Locals report that in times of prolonged droughts devotees used to climb up the mountains and burn pieces of leather in sacred dwellings of *joginīs*. The unpleasant smell greatly discomforted the *joginīs* and made them to bring forth the rain. Another tactic would involve the ruler. In the colonial period, for example, Emerson, a British administrator who governed Simla, was approached by villagers who asked him to fulfill the traditional role of the king and make the mediums of uncooperative deities stand naked in the sun until their respective deities comply and release the rains that they had blocked (Berti 2009: 315).

Haḍimbā too can be coerced into action. Lieut. Colonel C.G. Bruce, a British officer who conducted several expeditions in the Himalayan region and visited the Kullu Valley as well, reported how, in times of droughts, villagers utilized an age-old animosity existing between Hirma (as Haḍimbā is often called in colonial sources) and her brother, the god of the Gaphan peak:

[O]wing to the want of rain, the villagers determined to punish Hirma and so they threatened her first with bringing the god of the Gaphan over, which they did, then to put them in the same room together, and thirdly, which was most effective, to tie them back to back and stand them on their heads. This treatment proved the correct method for it rained the following day.¹⁷¹

In the Kullu region, as we have seen, many of the goddesses and gods are believed to have some control over the weather, especially in their own immediate

¹⁷¹ Bruce (1934: 230). It should be mentioned that I have never heard about this incident from any of my informants. It seems that nowadays no one would dare treat Haḍimbā in such an aggressive way. Also, the animosity that, according to this report, had existed between Haḍimbā and Lord Ghaipan (as he is now called) seems to have been forgotten. Ghaipan occasionally visits Haḍimbā's temple and is accepted here as a favored guest.

territories. However, the goddess Haḍimbā seems to enjoy a special status in this regard. She is believed to possess special powers over the climate in the Kullu Valley and tends to receive pleas from locals to check excessive rains, or to bring them forth in time of drought. When she is displeased with the actions of her devotees Haḍimbā may threaten to “throw fire at the trees”—that is, to dry up the land. Chaman once revealed that a certain mistake in a ritual performance in Haḍimbā’s temple angered her and made her halt the snow immediately. When, several days later, the mistake was corrected, it soon started raining and went on for four days in a row.¹⁷² Incidents like these are not at all new. A periodical named “North Indian Notes and Queries” reported in its October issue from 1894 about “a tremendous scare in the Upper Kullu Valley all over a goat.” According to the report, Haḍimbā (also called here Hirma) and another local god named Brahmā Deo, demanded a goat sacrifice. Locals, however, probably due to the “general decay of faith,” did not comply. Furious, Haḍimbā and Brahmā Deo, speaking through their mediums, foretold that a devastating landslide and flood would soon occur, which “would utterly destroy every vestige of cultivation, and all the villages on both banks of the river.” Terrified, the villagers “at once deserted their villages, panic-struck, and took refuge in the forests high up on the hillside.”¹⁷³ Whereas the prophecy was never actually fulfilled—a fact that is happily ridiculed by the author—it does indicate that Haḍimbā’s ability to control floods and other natural disasters in the valley, had long been recognized, and feared, by her devotees. Parasram, the resourceful thirty-five year old

¹⁷² Chaman was uncertain about the exact details of this specific event, but he was positive about the possibility of such an event. Haḍimbā is perfectly capable of inflicting climatic havoc if she is displeased with human ritual or general behavior.

¹⁷³ 1894: 126). This particular report was published unsigned but was probably written by H.A. Rose, whose other reports about Haḍimbā and the Kullu Valley had been published in earlier issues of this periodical.

lumberjack from Dhungri who is in charge of supplying the goddess with fresh flowers on festive occasions, shared his understanding of Haḍimbā's powers in this regard:

Udi: So do you mean that if people ask Haḍimbā to stop the rain, she can do that?

Parasram: Oh brother, Of course! Completely! 100 percent sure she can do that.

Udi: So is it according to her wish? If she wants, it rains, if she doesn't want, it doesn't?

Parasram: Exactly! Now it is a very hard time for people. The month that will start in two days should be completely clear - for drying the grass, for everything. It is time to prepare for winter: [drying] grass, [and cutting and collecting] wood.

Udi: So people pray to Haḍimbā and ask her for sunshine?

Parasram: Oh man, Haḍimbā is not alone. There are other temples around here that can do that. But this [Haḍimbā's] temple is the biggest. It is the 'police station of the gods' [*thānā* – 'police station,' or 'headquarters,' as it is often translated by locals in this context] (Parasram, Dhungri, September 14, 2010, note 2).

Parasram is positive about Haḍimbā's ability to check the untimely rains. At the end of our exchange he referred to an old tradition of dealing with exceptionally bad weather, which Shivkumar explains as follows:

Shivkumar: It is like this - when all the gods gather here, they gather because of the weather. They come from Kullu, Klat, and from above Klat. They gather from as far as Burua and Shnag.

Udi: When does this happen?

Shivkumar: When it is exceptionally difficult. When there is no rain. Then they gather here.

Udi: And then what happens?

Shivkumar: Then the *mātā* [the goddess Haḍimbā] brings forth the rain. For as long as there is no rain, the *mātā* keeps them [the visiting deities] inside her temple. Their *niśān* [the gods' ritual emblems, such as a staff, a bell, and a censer] can leave, but they themselves cannot and remain inside [until it rains].¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Shivkumar, Haḍimbā Temple, September 27, 2010, note d. Bruce probably relates to this tradition when he writes in 1914: "They [locals in the Kullu Valley] even go so far as to get their gods punished if necessary. Only some few years ago, on account of a drought, they brought several of their gods in to interview the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu [sic], and implored him to shut them up in the police lock-up until they behaved themselves better and produced rain. Well, three days later the rain came in deluges. There is no dealing with occurrences of that kind. To the people the rain was a perfectly natural result of their action" (Bruce 1934: 43). It could be that Bruce is confusing here one *thānā* with another.

Haḍimbā thus imprisons the recalcitrant deities in her temple until they are persuaded to return the weather to its normal course. Both the goddess and her temple are therefore strongly associated with climate-control powers.

The summer of 2009 came after a snowless winter—something that even the oldest persons in the vicinity had never seen before—and was exceptionally dry. *The Times of India*, in an article titled “Parched Himachal Areas Await Rains,” revealed that the state had received only a bit more than half (53%) of the usual rainfall for the season (Bhatt 2009). Villagers were worried about the fate of the corn and bean crops, and had already lost hope for a decent apple harvest. The need arose for a drastic action that would counter the developing drought. This eventually came in the form of an *aṭhārah bali* – the grand buffalo sacrifice discussed in the previous chapter.

Udi: Why do people give the buffalo *bali*?

Govind: We give it to the Devī [the goddess Haḍimbā], she’s Kālī, no?

Udi: So?

Govind: So we need to give her, so she takes care of the weather around here.

Udi: How are the two things related?

Govind: This is how it is. The weather is dependent first and foremost on Bhagvān [the supreme God], no? And the gods [Haḍimbā and the other local gods] are Bhagvān. So this is why we give [the *bali*] (Govind, near Haḍimbā temple, June 26, 2009).

Ajay (fifteen-year old): Look, those who have faith in the *mātā* [Haḍimbā] think that we should give [the buffalo as an offering]. Otherwise it won’t snow. Then no apples will grow, just as it happened this year. If we give now [if we sacrifice the buffalo], then next year all will be fine (Ajay, near Haḍimba temple, June 21, 2009).

The buffalo sacrifice, as described in detail in the previous chapter, is an expensive and elaborate event. It requires long preparations and careful management, involves significant number of participants, draws large crowds, and lasts the whole day. Delegations arrive from all the neighboring villages, carrying the paraphernalia of their

respective deities. A constant rhythmic drumbeat accompanies the event, long possession sessions take place, and a big communal meal is served at the end of the day. But the high point of the ritual is no doubt the sacrificial act itself. Here is how I described it in my notes:

Goddess Haḍimbā's Temple. End of June. It should have rained weeks ago, but all was still very dry. The mediums of visiting gods were dancing in the middle of the temple ground. The crowds were ecstatic. "Why are they doing all this?" I asked someone. "*Duniyā ke sukh śānti ke liye,*" he answered (for the happiness and tranquility of the whole world). "And for rain too!" he added. "Here it is," someone shouted "the buffalo!" I saw Rajaram positioning himself at the side of the beast. He lifted a huge 20-pound sword and laid a great blow to the buffalo's neck. "1,2,3,4,5!" The crowd counted the blows. The body collapsed, its head severed. People ran for the blood, to mark a *īrkā* on their foreheads. The tension that had been building up for weeks was broken with a slash of a sword. The huge feast was about to begin. And, yes, I forgot to mention: when they brought in the buffalo – it started raining!¹⁷⁵

When the buffalo was lying dead, and the rain was pouring down, Chaman, who had just fulfilled his ritual obligation of smashing a small water-crab was now busy hitting on several village girls. He was not a bit surprised: "It is always like this, you know. It always rains after we sacrifice a buffalo" (Chaman, near Haḍimbā temple, June 28, 2009). In the following days the weather became much more pleasant. While it still was not raining as it should have villagers were much more optimistic. Hiralal, a villager from Dhungri, noted: "It did rain a little bit, no? So it means that everything will be ok" (Hiralal, near Haḍimbā temple, July 1, 2009). A few days later I wrote the following in my diary: "the rain and the changing weather are perceived by everyone as a testimony for the successes of the buffalo *bali*" (field diary, July 1, 2009).

In the following year (2010), another special ritual was performed in honor of the goddess Haḍimbā, which was also considered to have had a profound effect on the

¹⁷⁵ This is a slightly abbreviated version of my original note from June, 29, 2009.

weather.¹⁷⁶ This time, however, the valley faced the opposite problem - one of the rainiest seasons in living memory:

Udi: Have you seen something like this before [so much rain]?

Kimi: No. this is the first year. I've never seen anything like this before.

Udi: Not even in your childhood?

Kimi: No no. Not so much. I have never seen so much [rain] before. We have never seen so much. But this year we have seen. We have seen so much rain this year (Kimi, near Haḍimbā temple, September 27, 2010, note a).

During a festival in a nearby village named Prini, the powerful god named Jamlu (Jamadagni Ṛṣi) declared that a buffalo sacrifice should again be offered to the goddess Haḍimbā. The goddess, however, speaking through her medium, vehemently refused. She said that she preferred a new kind of offering this time, one that has never been offered to her in the past and that would last nine whole days. Unfortunately, I myself could not attend this ritual as I was out of the country at the time. When I came back, many were quick to report about the grandeur of the event, its novelty, as well as on its huge success. Lalchand explained that the ritual, which he called the “*Sahasr Caṇḍī*,” involved eleven pundits who recited mantras for nine consecutive days. The event concluded with a big *havan* (a fire ritual) and a ritual meal.¹⁷⁷ Most of the devotees referred to this ritual simply as the “nine-day *pāṭh*” (ritual reading) and were particularly impressed with its unusual length, high number of officiating Brahmins, large quantities of food it required (100 kg of fruit alone), and the big tent that was erected in the temple yard.

¹⁷⁶ I mentioned this vegetarian puja in the previous chapter, on p.179-80.

¹⁷⁷ Since I did not attend this ritual myself I couldn't figure out its exact nature but it seems to have been a prolonged version of the more common *yāg*. It could be that this ritual involved the reading of the *Devī Māhātmya*, a text also known as the Caṇḍī Pāṭha. Yet this seems a bit unlikely since no one I spoke with mentioned anything about it.

On August 6, one day before the ceremony was completed, a devastating disaster hit the town of Leh, about 200 km north of Manali in the neighboring region of Ladak. Heavy rains, followed by a cloudburst, led to a sudden flood that caused huge destruction and left more than a hundred and fifty people dead. Large parts of the town were wiped out and neighboring villages were flattened. Rescue efforts continued for days and the story was covered extensively in the national media.¹⁷⁸

The news, coming at a time when the Kullu Valley itself was undergoing a period of exceptionally heavy rains, naturally fueled locals' anxieties. One had every reason in the world to fear that a similar misfortune could hit home just as well. Every reason but one. Locals, so it turned out, found great confidence in the nine-day *pūjā* that had just been performed. A few days later, I called Chaman, who said that villagers were not at all worried, as they counted on Haḍimbā to protect them from a similar fate. If anything, he explained, people were worried about the Himachalis that were caught in Leh when the flood hit (many local taxi drivers travel this route on a regular basis.) But even there, Chaman boasted, Haḍimbā's powers did not fail. A certain jeep driver from the region, who had been in Leh at the time the flood hit, told Chaman how the gushing stream of water, upon reaching the parking lot of the H.P. vehicles, suddenly split in two and circumvented the ground from both sides, leaving cars and people untouched. When I returned to the village a few weeks later, Sisu, a villager of Old Manali and an owner of a successful guest house, concluded the matter unequivocally: "The nine-day *pūjā* saved

¹⁷⁸ Here, for example, is how *The Times of India* described what happened: "Rescue workers struggled through piles of mud and slush looking for over 500 people missing in the Friday's devastating cloudburst that flattened villages and snapped power and communication links even as the death toll in the tragedy on Sunday mounted to 145" PTI (2010).

the valley from harm – there were no floods here. Kullu Valley is safe!” (Sisu, Old Manali, September 8, 2010, note b).

As we can see, weather conditions in the Kullu Valley are hardly perceived as a purely physical phenomenon. In particular, aberrant and untimely conditions are interpreted through a prism that associates natural phenomena, local divinities, and human ritual action. According to local worldview, humans, gods and environment constitute an encompassing totality in which each of them plays a vital role. Whereas weather conditions usually follow a regular cycle, in times of exceptional disturbances, ritual mechanisms are available for pleading with the gods to return the weather to its normal course.

Interestingly, and of great significance to our discussion in the following pages, the weather conditions in the Kullu Valley, just like the divine powers that control them and the human rituals that manipulate them, are all rooted in and bounded within the locality. We have already seen how the sacrifice of a sheep to Pātāl Devtā—a relatively small event taking place in one corner of the village—was presented by locals as the reason behind a prolonged rainstorm in the immediate surroundings. On another occasion, the very same deity was claimed to have halted the rains so another highly localized event—a performance of an outdoor rite in his honor—would not be disturbed. Such pointed and place-focused weather manipulations by deities seem to happen all the time. Khimraj, a local trekking guide, revealed how he prayed to his village god Shank Narayan, petitioning him to stop the rains so a trek he was about to guide would not be canceled. Such a focused weather request, made by a single man and for a very personal reason, was quickly granted by the god—the sky cleared up, the rain ceased, and the sun shined through. Haḍimbā too is capable of such pointed weather manipulations. Jograd

(in his twenties), who sells *prasād* to tourists visiting the temple, explained that a particular pause in rains was a direct result of a leakage in the roof of Haḍimbā's temple. The goddess, who did not want the interior of her temple damaged, immediately halted the rains until the leakage was fixed. All these examples reveal a meteorological logic that is quite different from contemporary understandings of the climate as a global system. In the Kullu Valley weather conditions are understood as confined to the *locality*, determined by *regional* divinities, and manipulated through *place-based* ritual actions performed by residents of *this territory*.

We should also note that all this is true despite the ongoing climatic changes that have taken place in the region in the past several decades, which have destabilized the older, more familiar weather patterns. Locals, who have witnessed the gradual warming and the exceptional fluctuations in the meteorological conditions, have not lost their faith in the validity of their worldview in this regard. Weather-control rituals continue to be performed, participation is still rather extensive, and devotees are engaged and interested in the predictions of the gods. The holistic paradigm seems to be holding up in the sphere of ritual. At the same time, however, as we will now see, it is in everyday discourse and in messages delivered by the gods themselves that new concerns emerge.

A Threefold Typology

The perceived success of the weather-control rituals cannot conceal the fact that the climate in the Kullu Valley is changing. These rituals, which are deemed effective in alleviating specific weather disturbances, fail to counter the harmful long-term transformations, whose intensity and magnitude compel locals to reevaluate their assumptions in this regard. Their conclusions, expressed in interviews and everyday

conversations, reveal a wide variety of notions regarding the reasons behind the change, as well as about the extent of human complicity in it, the degree of divine control over it, and the prospects of turning it around. These conclusions do not add up to a unified, coherent or clear-cut worldview but, rather, reveal confusion, uncertainty and disagreement, as well as doubts regarding locals' agency and the validity of the traditional approach. Despite this 'messy' nature of popular analyses, however, one can broadly identify three types of reasons offered for the climate change: (1) locals' forsaking of traditional lifestyle and values; (2) harmful external forces working in the locality; and (3) apocalyptic universal processes to which the locality succumbs. While not so discrete in villagers' everyday talk, I do feel that this threefold typology nicely illustrates the different levels of concern expressed by locals in this regard. It makes sense, therefore, to present locals' explanations using this typology as long as we keep in mind the fact that in practice they often appear in tandem or seemingly as components of one another.

Reason 1: Etiological Reflections on Moral Decline

People have changed and then the weather has changed (Parasram, Dhungri, September 14, 2010, note 2).

We should probably start by noting that, indeed, there is a lot of confusion among locals regarding the reasons behind the recent climatic change. Weather patterns are shifting and people are genuinely perplexed about it:

Udi: So what is going on [I refer to the ongoing excessive rains]?

Kimi: I really don't know what happened this year.

Udi: What do other people say? What does everyone think?

Kimi: People just don't know (Kimi, near Haḍimbā temple, September 27, 2010, note a).

“Ask above!” suggested a certain elderly villager, a bit drunk, on his way back home from a village wedding. He meant that I should address my weather-related inquiries to god, since no one else seems to know.

Yet many other villagers do have some theories. Almost everyone in Old Manali and Dhungri blames the changing climate on humans’ declining morals. They observe that sin [*pāp*] has increased all over and that the gods, deeply enraged by this conduct, have altered the weather to punish humans.¹⁷⁹ Greed (locals often use the English word in this context) and relentless pursuit of money, are probably the most conspicuous of all contemporary vices:

Old man: Once, nobody talked about money so much [he raises his voice and seems very agitated and angry]. We used to help each other. We gave loans. There was respect. Today, if you lend someone money, you need to ask it back like a beggar “please, could you give me my money back?” And the borrower will reply, “what money? I won’t give it back! What will you do?”...the whole world has gone crazy. Everybody is only after money, money, money... (elderly villager, Old Manali, September 29, 2010 note b).

Chasing material wealth, people have become dishonest and deceitful. “Now everyone is lying,” explained a middle-aged villager from Old Manali when we met on a forest trail leading to town. “When people talk, like we talk now, you can never tell how much of it is true, and how much is a lie.” He complained about a host of things that have gone corrupt in the village in the past two decades and explained that this is what causes the bad weather. Now, you simply cannot trust anyone. “Once you could leave a bag on the road and nobody would touch it for four days; nowadays, half an hour and it’s gone” (middle-aged villager, forest trail leading to Manali, September 28, 2010 note a).

¹⁷⁹ Whereas the word *pāp* carries clear religious overtones, in local use it is often used to indicate a wider spectrum of inappropriate behaviors: immoral, dishonest, immodest, abusive, disrespectful, etc.

This, the person continued, has inevitably led to alienation and lack of solidarity, which have affected the weather:

Local person: The people are different now, so the weather has also changed....

Udi: In what way? How were the people like, back then, in your childhood?

Local person: Back then it used to be very good. Everyone said good things, did good things. They never lied. People used to gather, say eight or ten people, and they would sit together, for eating and drinking. They used to do this a lot.

Udi: And now?

Local person: Now what? Now everyone has their own job, or they are doing their own thing.

Udi: You mean that now everyone is separate [*alag alag*]?

Local person: Yes. Now everyone is separate. This is how it turned out (middle-aged villager, forest trail leading to Manali, September 28, 2010 note a).

Another, much older person from Old Manali, expressed similar views: “Once, everyone slept in one room. We ate together. We slept together. Today everyone wants separate room, separate kitchen, separate toilet. What is this? I just don’t get it” (elderly villager, Old Manali, September 29, 2010 note b).

Individualization and alienation often lead to competition and then, sometimes, to animosity. Locals noted how everyone has grown envious of one another, especially of those who were successful in the tourist business. If someone opens up a business in the village and is doing well, explained a young villager, others will quickly become jealous and do everything they can to make sure he fails. Particular animosity, he explained, exists between the “apple people” and “tourism people.” In previous years, whenever the “tourism people” tried to organize full-moon parties in the woods—popular events among foreign tourists that are quite lucrative for local organizers—the “apple people” would call the police and ask them to shut the party down. This is one of the reasons, he concluded, why there are hardly any such parties in Old Manali any longer.

Other villagers identify the unprecedented laziness of people and their pursuit of comfort as a particularly alarming aspect of the moral decline. Farmers, so it turns out, do not want to work in the fields anymore—tedious work by all accounts—and are constantly looking for opportunities to make easy money in tourism. Since so many people have turned their fields into guesthouses, they no longer subsist on self-grown food and need to buy their groceries in the market – a form of consumerism that was much despised until very recently. A villager in his forties recalled how, when he was a child, people who bought food in the market used to hide it under their coat upon entering the village. Villagers, he explained, were ashamed of buying their provisions in the market instead of growing it themselves. Others express similar views:

Once we used to grow everything ourselves. Everything came from the land: rice, dāl [lentils], corn. Today, everyone is going to the market. We no longer grow anything ourselves. What is this? What has happened to us? (elderly villager, Old Manali, September 29, 2010 note b).

Such immoral behavior, locals conclude, greatly enrages the gods. People have become like children who, nowadays, no longer listen to their elders and do not respect authority anymore. They are disobedient and they misbehave:

Old person: The gods are angry. This is why the weather has changed.

Udi: Why are they angry?

Old person: It is like when you have kids, and suddenly they grow up and don't listen to you anymore. The gods then become angry, [thinking]: “why don't they listen to us anymore?” Today, children don't listen to their parents. They do whatever they want (elderly villager, Old Manali, September 29, 2010 note b).

Amarnath, with whom I spent numerous enjoyable hours, is a thirty-year-old devotee of the goddess Haḍimbā. Originally from Ujjain, he came to Manali as a child, and when his father passed away he stayed here, living as a renouncer in a small shack in

Dhungri, near Haḍimbā's temple. In one of our conversations he plainly summarized the nature of the relation between Haḍimbā, her people and the bad weather:

Amarnath: Two to three months ago they asked the *mātā* [mother, the goddess Haḍimbā] in the temple [about the weather] since it hasn't rained. The *mātā* said she was angry...

Udi: Why was she angry?

Amarnath: It is like when a child does not listen to his mother – won't she get angry with him? It is the same thing here.

Udi: You mean that people did not listen to the *mātā*?

Amarnath: No. They didn't (Amarnath, chai shop near Haḍimbā temple, July 5, 2009).

Traditional values and modes of behavior in the Kullu Valley are rapidly deteriorating. Almost everyone in Old Manali and Dhungri feels that the former commendable ideals—simplicity, honesty, solidarity, and hard work—have given way to new immoral ones—greed, trickery, alienation and laziness. Capitalist modernity, introduced in the region by means of roads, communication systems, cash-crops economy and tourism, has been accompanied by new ideals and norms of conduct.¹⁸⁰ It has prompted ambivalent feelings among locals, who embrace the new comfortable lifestyle on the one hand, while, on the other, lament the loss of the old ways of living. The worsening climate is understood to both result from and reflect this moral decline and to signal that the system as a whole is getting out of control.

We should note, however, that within this particular discourse, while villagers interpret the climate changes as the outcome of their abandonment of traditional ways and values, this very interpretation is still rooted in their tradition—that is, in its holistic

¹⁸⁰ In speaking of capitalist modernity and the set of values and behaviors it carries with it, I follow Sudipta Kaviraj's definition of modernity: "When we are talking about modernity, we are talking about a number of processes of social change which can be studied, or analysed independently of each other – such as, capitalist industrialisation, the increasing centrality of the state in the social order (Foucault's "governmentality"), urbanisation, sociological individuation, secularisation in politics and ethics, the creation of a new order of knowledge, vast changes in the organisation of family and intimacy, changes in various fields of artistic and literary culture" (Kaviraj 2005: 508).

perception of reality. Similarly, the agency of goddesses and gods and their absolute power to control the weather is also unquestioned, and so is the agency of humans. It is, after all, human behavior that has brought about the climate change and it is still in their power to turn it around. Theoretically at least, one can infer that if humans corrected their ways the climate could regain its normal course.

Reason 2: Resource-Strained Environment and the Working of Extra-Local Forces in the Locality

Why is this change of weather? In my mind it is due to the rise in population. Previously there weren't so many cars, hotels and shops around here. Now there are so many houses and tin roofs too. They reflect the sunlight and create heat. So many cars are arriving from Delhi, Punjab etc. All this creates heat...Every year we see new houses, more and more houses, in Goshal, Burua, Shnag. People from Delhi and Bombay are also building here. Fifteen years ago there was nothing like that here. Now look how many houses.¹⁸¹

Whereas in the first line of reasoning locals foreground the improper ways in which they treat each other, in the second line of reasoning they concentrate on how their actions negatively impact the environment. The notion of “excess,” almost always perceived here as negative, seems to underlie much of this analysis. Thus, for example, one of the major causes for the climate change mentioned by many is population growth. The vast number of tourists visiting the valley in any given time, as well as the increase in local population, are the main reasons for this growth. More people generate more heat, locals argue, through their bodily temperature, the fires they use for cooking and heating, and the houses they build.¹⁸² Since most of the new houses and hotels are “*pakka*” structures—made of cement rather than traditional materials—they are much

¹⁸¹ Hiralal, near Haḍimbā temple, December 28, 2009, note 3. Hiralal, in his fifties, is a resident of Dhungri village and an owner of a souvenir stall near Haḍimbā's temple.

¹⁸² In the Old Manali area ongoing construction is now part of the village everyday routine. Throughout the day one can hear the sound of builders hammering.

less efficient thermally and require more energy for heating in winter and cooling in summer. Furthermore, unlike the traditional stone slates that covered old houses, the new shiny tin roofs reflect the beams of the sun and increase the temperature even more.

The increasing number of people also entails a growing demand for natural resources. Deforestation, which has grave implications for the climate, is a case in point.

Here is how Khimraj and others explained it:

Udi: So why has the weather changed?

Khimraj: Oh brother, the climate has changed significantly. There is a big mess [gaḍbaḍ]. So many cars arrive in Manali each year, who knows how many. It is because of the pollution, that it [the weather] has changed... It has changed a lot, brother. This is the climate change. And they also cut trees. What can you do? Every household needs one tree every year. Now, see how many houses are there in Manali.... When someone dies [a tree is needed for the cremation]

Person: For *muṇḍan* too [the rite of the child's first tonsure]....

Udi: How much wood is needed for *muṇḍan*?

Khimraj: One tree!

Udi: One tree! Why?

Khimraj: Brother, you need to invite the whole village, invite the relatives. You need to prepare a big *kḍāi* [huge cooking pot heated over burning wood] - how will you do that? [i.e. you need a lot of wood for that.]

Udi: So this is for *muṇḍan*. What else?

Khimraj: For wedding too...you need one tree. A whole tree, brother, small tree won't do.

Udi: And for what else?

Khimraj: Well, when someone dies, again you need a tree [listeners to our conversation starts laughing]. When someone dies you need even more.

Person: You need wood for cremation, and then for cooking too [at the end of the mourning period, the family of the deceased invites the village people for a big communal meal.]

Khimraj: And then in the following year you need another tree, and after four years another one [this custom, of inviting villagers for a communal meal on the first and fourth death anniversary, while still observed by some is generally on the wane] [everybody's laughing]. This is the problem brother. This is why it [the weather] has changed so much The first reason is this [the cutting of trees], the second reason is pollution, the third is the [many] houses built by the people. The population is increasing, the pollution is increasing, so the change in climate is inevitable, brother!

Udi: And the goddesses and gods, do they say anything about it?

Khimraj: What will the goddesses and gods say? What can they say? (Khimraj, near Haḍimbā temple, January 17, 2011, note 2).

Deforestation is indeed thought of by many as a central reason for the climate change and similar views are often expressed in local newspapers as well. Thus, for example, in an article titled “Deforestation Changes Rainfall Patterns,” published in the *Himachal This Week* magazine, a local activist named Ravinder Sood explains that “The green hills in Himachal Pradesh have been stripped of forest cover over the past ten years, resulting in flash floods, destructive landslides and a complete change in the pattern of rain” (Sood 2009).

Air pollution, as can be seen in Khimraj’s explanation, is also considered a big factor behind the changing climate. Like elsewhere, this often goes hand in hand with complaints about the excess in traffic and number of cars. Indeed, throughout the year and especially during the high-season months, the Kullu Valley and particularly the town of Manali are packed with traffic.¹⁸³ Long lines of vehicles (sometimes kilometers-long...), whose engines are often badly tuned for the relatively high altitude, jam the roads and dramatically increase air pollution levels. Walking down from Haḍimbā’s temple, which is located in the midst of a pine grove slightly higher from Manali, to the town’s market area, one can actually feel the rise in temperature. Though I have never measured this difference accurately it seems to me that the market area is at least 3-5 degrees Celsius warmer than the temple area.

Traffic and air pollution, however, are not the only forms of tourism-related pollution that has negative effect on the climate. In a conversation with Shivkumar I

¹⁸³ Here is how *The Times of India* describe this: “Police sources say more than 10,000 floating vehicles enter the valley on a daily basis. Innumerable vehicles wrongly parked on roadside and building waste dumped all over the streets makes it difficult for cars and other automobiles to make their way” (Kumar 2009).

mentioned that several people claimed that “*jūth prīth*” was the reason behind all this. I asked him to clarify what they meant.

Shivkumar: Here [in the Kullu Valley], a temple is considered the home of the gods. This is where they reside. And people are doing wrong things there. They eat, they drink, and they throw leftovers [*jūthā*]. For example, when people go on trekking, or even just for a short hike, and they throw garbage, this is also a kind of *Jūth prīth*. It is like this [this is one explanation of what *jūth prīth* means]. [Second,] you go out on a trek and your wife, or your girlfriend, is also coming along with you. You go there [to the forest] and you do some inappropriate acts. So the *devtās*, they also live there. And once you do the inappropriate acts, you throw it out there [...]. This is also a wrong thing [the second form of *Jūth prīth*]. This is also a reason [for the changing climate] (Shivkumar, near Haḍimbā temple, September 27, 2010 note d).

Food leftovers and the promiscuous sexual behavior of tourists pollute the sacred jungle abodes of the goddesses and gods. In response, the latter disrupt climatic cycles, most likely by affecting strong rains to purify the place. Raman Sharma, who is also Shivkumar’s uncle, told me once the following story about the meteorological effects of *jūthā*:

One time, when I was very small, I really didn’t know [that the *joginī* lived in the forest and that one should not eat there since this is considered impure.] I went there, and ate some food and drank something. All this was *jūthā*. When I came back, the clear weather was gone in no time and it began raining very heavily. This thing was the proof [of the connection between leftover food, angry *joginīs* and heavy rains] (Raman, Haḍimbā temple, December 23, 2010 note 1).

Others also accuse female tourists of visiting local temples while menstruating, thereby polluting the sacred grounds. This too can result in heavy purifying rains: “You know why it rained today?” asked me a certain villager just after the buffalo sacrifice to the goddess Haḍimbā. He soon answered himself: “because many women came here and while they should have come clean, some of them came without taking a bath. So the

mātā brought the rain to clean everyone. She did this in order to make everything here pure [*śuddh*]” (villager, near Ghaṭotkaca’s shrine, June 28, 2009).

In general, foreign tourists are vehemently courted by locals in Old Manali for business purposes. Villagers are very careful not to criticize tourists’ conduct so as not to drive them away. In fact, it is my impression that many in the village genuinely enjoy the presence of international tourists, and not merely for financial reasons. The presence of foreigners in Old Manali turns the village into a rather unique place, where locals can rub shoulders with people from all over the world, try out international cuisine, and learn about places as far away as Korea, Japan, Israel, Russia, and USA. Locals also gain a special regional prestige because of this proximity to tourists.

At the same time, as we have already seen above, the immoral ways of tourists do not go unnoticed. People, mainly men, often condemn the loose sartorial conventions of foreign girls, arguing that this has a corrupting influence on local girls who, upon seeing the tourists, want to adopt a more liberal dress code themselves. Others are critical of the great degree of physical intimacy, such as hugging and kissing, displayed in public by foreign tourists. This behavior is both ridiculed and imitated by local males, who feel confident enough to try it out in their interactions with foreign girls. But most common of all is no doubt the criticism of foreigners’ tendency to “marry multiple times.” Locals—again, mostly men, but in this case also women—raised this fact whenever they wanted to ridicule or tease me. At first, I tried to explain that not all foreigners remarry and that many remain happily monogamous. With time, however, it dawned on me that what locals meant by “marrying” was, in fact, “having sex.” According to locals, foreigners follow a rather loose sexual moral code and can have casual sexual relationship with different partners. While, as I also learned after a while, villagers themselves were not as

modest or monogamous as they presented themselves to be, foreigners' promiscuous sexual behavior remained a marker of their immoral conduct and bad influence.

These and other negative effects of tourism in the Kullu Valley are studied by Jagdish Kuniyal, who writes the following in this regard:

Tourism transforms the societies and introduces unwanted and undesirable changes in the value systems, lifestyle, creative expressions, language and individual behaviour of the host communities.... As an impact of acculturation and unplanned tourism, there arise many harmful effects such as, drug addiction, crime, prostitution, and moral degradation (Kuniyal 2004: 13).

Kuniyal, who interviewed 128 hoteliers in the Manali town area, goes on to argue that “degradation in moral values...has been quite acutely felt by the hoteliers and has been noticed even among the rural poor.... Westernisation, alcoholism, gambling...and drug abuse among the youth are the chief matters of concern here” (Kuniyal 2004: 122). 80.5% of interviewees thought that the moral values of the host community were eroded due to tourism. Interestingly, they identified “Westernisation” as the most common form of moral degradation they encountered—73.2% of hoteliers observed it in the host community (Kuniyal 2004: 123). It thus becomes clear that tourists' immoral behavior affects the weather not only directly—as in cases of *jūṭh prīṭh* discussed above—but also indirectly, by corrupting locals' conduct, which, as we have already seen in the first line of reasoning, is a central factor behind the climate change. Whereas locals do not point out this triple connection explicitly, both parts of the equation do come up separately in local discourse.

Explanations for the changing climate introduced in this second line of reasoning indicate a partial departure from the logic underlying the previous set of explanations. First, whereas weather conditions are still perceived to be a largely regional phenomenon,

rooted in and determined by what happens in the locality, many of the forces working here in impacting and disturbing the weather, are identified as *coming from the outside*. Population growth, construction of hotels, excessive traffic, air and even moral pollution are here blamed on visiting tourists. Even the immoral behavior of locals is pointed by some to result from the negative example set by tourists. Thus, whereas weather conditions are still considered something determined in the locality, they are now understood to be shaped by extra-regional forces that are at work here as well.

Second, these newly introduced powers undermine the agency of both humans and gods. It is no longer solely the immoral behavior of locals that alter the weather patterns, but the improper conduct of tourists as well. Local divinities too, while retaining some of their agency—they still manipulate the weather in response to the defilement of their abodes—are no longer the only powers in charge. Overpopulation, deforestation, excessive construction, air pollution and heat are also considered climate-damaging forces that work *independently* of the gods. It is no wonder that Khimraj, who is usually quite confident about the gods' ability to manipulate the weather, questioned this very ability after expounding on the harms of overpopulation, air pollution and deforestation—"what will the goddesses and gods say? What can they say?" (Khimraj, near Haḍimbā temple, January 17, 2011, note 2).

Third, whereas the traditional holistic understanding of the ecology still stands, it is slowly giving way to the competing scientific logic of global warming, even if the term itself is not explicitly mentioned. Although the identification of overpopulation, excessive construction, air pollution, and deforestation as the cause of the climatic change still indicates a holistic understanding of reality, the elements participating in this reality and the ways in which they interact, are not quite the same as in the traditional ecology.

Divine powers, human moral behavior and ritual action are supplemented, if not substituted, in this new ecology by distinctly new elements.

Reason 3: Global Processes and a New Paradigm

The third and last line of reasoning employed by locals in explaining the recent climatic changes marks a departure from the principles underlying their worldview as presented so far. As we will see, in this case the agency of both humans and gods is severely challenged, if not completely gone. The climate is no longer believed to be determined in the locality, and the holistic understanding of the ecology is on the verge of collapse.

In the quote opening this chapter, we have seen how Vidya blamed the untimely sprouting of leaves on the Kaliyug: “That’s the way it is. It is the Kaliyug now, everything is upside down [*ulṭā*]...” (Vidya, Old Manali, September 26, 2010, note b). Similar views are held by many others in the village. But what exactly is the Kaliyug?

The Hindu image of time, adopted by the Purānas and other classical texts, is cyclical in nature and based on the notion that the universe is undergoing repeated and endless cycles of creation and destruction. The basic in a series of such cycles is the kalpa, an eon that lasts 4,320,000 human years, and is comprised of four ages (*yug*): Kṛtayug, Tretāyug, Dvāparayug, and the Kaliyug. The degeneration that characterizes the progress of the ages is often expressed through the image of the cow, understood to represent Dharma. While in the perfect Kṛtayug—also known as Satyug, the Age of Truth—the cow stands firmly on all her four legs; in the Tretāyug she stands on only three; and during the Dvāparayug on two alone. In the Kaliyug the cow is tottering on only one leg. This dark time, which is thought to have started with the Mahābhārata war (traditionally dated to 3102 BCE), is our present age. It is the bleakest of all ages, a time

of rampant unrighteousness, when people do not follow their proper duties and rulers are dishonest, weak and greedy. People are sinful, disrespectful to each other, especially to parents and teachers; they are preoccupied with pursuing wealth; they lust and marry for sexual pleasure alone. The Kaliyug is also a time of grave environmental conditions, of disasters, droughts and torrential rains, of floods and burning flames.¹⁸⁴

Many, if not all of these characteristics of the Kaliyug, find expression in locals' observations. Govind, a villager from Old Manali, works as a photographer near Haḍimbā's temple. For a small fee he accompanies honeymoon couples and tourist families during their visit and takes their pictures in attractive locations. He sometimes gets into intense trance during major village rituals. In the following conversation, Govind lays out his view of the Kaliyug. I present it here almost in its entirety since it nicely captures much of what locals think on the subject:

Govind: You must have seen how much the world has changed in recent years.... Previously people used to understand each other. There was love. There was harmony [tāl mel]. I mean, getting up, sitting down, that was equal.... People helped each other.... This is called Satyug. This is how it was before. Now it is the Kaliyug - do you know about this?

Udi: A little bit, but do tell me about it. When did it start?

Govind: Well...this started a long time ago. It began in the time of the Mahābhārata. It was the time of the Pāṇḍavas, it started then. The Kaliyug is very long....

Udi: And what does it mean, the Kaliyug?

Govind: It means that it is upon the people [logon ke uppar hai].

Udi: what do you mean?

Govind: I mean... the Kaliyug is just like things are right now [we are now living in the Kaliyug]. It is in accordance with people's way of thinking.

Udi: What do you mean? Do you mean that people only think about money? [This is how many others presented this issue in previous conversations.]

Govind: Yes. About money. And they think "I am big!" [I am independent, I can rely on myself alone]. There is no love. There is no feeling [sympathy]. The young are no longer thought of as young, the elders are no longer thought of

¹⁸⁴ See Michaels (2004: 300-304)

- as elders [social norms and proper behavior are no longer respected and followed]. People are running around trying to cut [kill] each other.
- Udi: How did you learn about all this?
- Govind: From a book [*granth*], from history, from an astrologer - the pundit who comes here sometimes...he has all the details.
- [I'm skipping a few parts here]
- Govind: The Kaliyug is, in fact, a system - it is changing. When there is a change in how people think, this is the Kaliyug.
- Udi: so it is about change?
- Govind: It is about change. It is like this - when your heart is set against me. When there is no compassion in your heart towards me. It is like this.
- Udi: Is it like this with all people? Or are there some good people among us too?
- Govind: There are both good people and bad people. Because of the few good people the world is still running.
- Udi: So what will happen, say, in 20 years?
- Govind: In 20 years, peoples' heart will be completely empty. Nothing. People will think only this 'only me, only me' [*meṃ hi meṃ huṃ*]. 'There is nothing else besides me' [people will become selfish and think only about themselves]. This is the meaning of the Kaliyug. Also, let's say there is this girl in your house - please forgive me for saying this, don't think badly of me [this is a common apology in Kullu, usually used when someone is about to say something that may insult the interlocutor, or discuss delicate matters]... People will use their own girls.
- Udi: In the family?
- Govind: Yes, in the family. They will do such bad [sexual] things. It will be like this!
- Udi: Now too?
- Govind: Now too. Everywhere you go. Everywhere.
- Udi: This is very strange. It is a sin no?
- Govind: Yes it is. It is a sin. Soon, the system will become like that of the Muslims. The Muslims marry among each other.
- Udi: You mean, inside the family?
- Govind: Yes. Young brother with older brother [their children can marry each other in cousin marriage]. In the Hindu religion this is forbidden. But it will happen too, with time.
- Udi: But tell me, can't people do anything about it?
- Govind: What can people do? Everything will happen this way. This is how everybody's mentality will be. The only one who can change this is god. This is why the Tsunami is coming. Floods are coming.
- Udi: Because of this [people's bad actions]?
- Govind: Yes. Because of this! This is all because of this. This is why it is all upside-down now. This is the sound of God's blows. See the great devastation that happened in Leh-Ladak. It is like this. The more sin is committed upon the earth, the more... the mountains for examples, they will bury us. They will fall, in an earthquake.
- Udi: Oh... But won't they help us [I point to Haḍimbā's temple, thus referring to Haḍimbā and the other gods]?

Govind: Listen, what will they do? They will also back down, pull back.
 Udi: What do you mean?
 Govind: They will also desert everything.
 Udi: Really? Where will they go?
 Govind: Tell me, who has seen them nowadays? This is all a matter of feeling now. Who has seen Haḍimbā Mātā? Have I seen her? Have you seen her? You haven't seen her, right? This is a matter of faith [*viśvās*]. On the day the faith in her is over, on that day all this will happen [all the bad things we have been discussing]. Yes. This is my prediction. All this, which I have told you today!
 Udi: When the faith is over, then everything will be finished.
 Govind: Everything will be finished. Water will cover the earth.
 Udi: So this means that now people still have at least little faith, no?
 Govind: Now there is still little faith left. This is why the world is still running, a little bit. On the day faith is over, love is over, the feeling... then [all this will happen]!
 Udi: How much time do we have left then?
 Govind: Now we still have enough time.
 Udi: In our lifetime, or later?
 Govind: No.... It is like this.... Our lives will still go on fine. In the future it will be harder. It is like when people say that in 2012 all will be finished.
 Udi: But 2012 is next year....
 Govind: This was also told by a certain pundit – an astrologer (*jyōtiṣī*). This was his prediction...

Govind's understanding of the Kaliyug, which nicely captures what others in Old Manali and Dhungri think, is very much in line with the classical Puranic views presented above. Indeed, Govind acknowledges that he has learned a lot about the subject from a certain Brahman astrologer who visits the village from time to time. Several points he raises are especially noteworthy, such as his understanding of the Kaliyug as a *system of change* (“The Kaliyug is, in fact, a system—it is changing.”) The English word ‘system,’ is frequently used by locals to describe social and religious institutions that are operating according to a predefined set of rules and in an organized, non-arbitrary manner. Thus, for example, marriage customs are called ‘the marriage system’, and so are the caste-determined sitting arrangements during public feasts (“we sit according to our system”). The Kaliyug, then, is perceived by Govind as a predetermined and structured process of

change that is bound by specific rules. The most conspicuous aspect of this structured change is the fact that it is constantly and persistently degrading. In contrast to the ever-praised Satyug, the Kaliyug is a time when all positive qualities—love, caring, mutual understanding—are gone, and all the negative ones—selfishness, disrespect, animosity and violence—are on the rise. Cousin marriage and incest, the most common of all cultural taboos, mark the total collapse of family, community and social structure. Climatic and other related disasters are on the rise: the floods in Leh; the tsunami (by which Govind refers to the disastrous 2004 water wave that originated in the Indian ocean and took the lives of more than 230,000 people in more than fourteen states); and the future earthquakes that will bury all humanity under the falling mountains. All these blows are but small indications given by God (*ūpar vala* – “the one above,” a term designating a rather abstract form of divinity) of what is yet to come.

This last point is especially interesting since it reveals the deterministic character of the Kaliyug in Govind’s vision. If at first it may have seemed that the general decline is somehow dependent on human behavior (“it is upon the people”), it slowly becomes clear that the changing “mentality” of humans is less the *cause* of the process than its *outcome*. In this “system of change” people are bound to behave in such a horrific manner. Their hearts will only get hollow with time, and their sins greater and more acute. Govind concludes by stressing this fatalism: “This is my prediction!” he says, signaling how positive he is about the inevitable direction and outcome of this process. While God [*ūpar vala*] is active in inflicting blows on people, the local goddesses and gods seem to be helpless. They have pulled back long ago. Govind is not even sure if they are still around anymore. The little faith that is still retained by people like him and a few others is what keeps the world running, at least for now. But all this, too, is

unquestionably destined to end, if not in our lifetime, then in the lives of future generations.

Interestingly, Govind associates the Kaliyug with popular apocalyptic ideas concerning the year 2012. The origin of the 2012 phenomenon, as it is sometimes called, is in the ancient Mayan Long Count calendar, which completes a cycle of approximately 5126 years on December, 21st 2012, the winter solstice of that year. This date is now believed by many around the world to mark the End-of-the-World or, at least, a significant moment of apocalyptic global transformation. Whereas scholars familiar with the Mayan calendar argue that “this so-called Great Cycle,” whose end is supposed to mark the apocalypse, “was only a minor component in far larger chronological periods that theoretically extend infinitely backwards and forward in time.” While the end of this cycle probably carried no significant meaning it has captured the imagination of many around the world (Sitler 2006: 25). Hundreds of books, thousands of websites and even one fairly successful film (called simply “2012”), have contributed to spreading this prophecy around the globe, which now enjoys great popularity among various New-Age groups.

In Old Manali and Dhungri, the 2012 phenomenon is on everybody’s mind. Vidya, my landlady, has also bought into the idea:

Vidya: The end of the world is coming!

Udi: Why the end of the world?

Vidya: Look around you? Why is there so much rain? It has to do with the 2012 thing.

Udi: Do you believe in this?

Vidya: I don’t know. But that’s what people say. Otherwise why is there so much rain? It is everywhere, and it’s going on and on (Vidya, Old Manali, Septmeber 22, 2010 note 1).

Chaman too enjoyed reflecting on this matter. He was pretty sure that the heavy rains indeed marked the beginning of what was yet to come in 2012. Another person, who runs a successful tourist business in the town of Manali, told me that he was thinking of buying an apartment in Delhi, but that although he had the money he decided to wait until 2012 is over. It was my impression that he first wanted to make sure that Delhi, and perhaps the whole world, survive. Almost everyone I talked with, who blamed the changing climate on the working of the Kaliyug, integrated the 2012 prophecy into his or her analysis, and did so quite seamlessly.

In speaking about the Kaliyug and the looming 2012 apocalypse, cracks appear in the traditional holistic worldview. While it may seem that human morality and environmental reality are still closely linked here, there is nevertheless one important difference – there is no longer any causal connection between the two. The Kaliyug is a universal deterministic process that is *not* predicated on human behavior, and over which no one, not even the goddesses and gods, has any control. Human agency, and interestingly, human responsibility too, is absent from this explanation. Furthermore, the worsening climate is no longer perceived to be a local issue but, rather, an aspect of a universal, even cosmic, process, which is larger than anything that happens in this particular region. Humans and their gods are no longer in control, either here, or anywhere else.

Although people in old Manali and Dhungri do evoke phenomena that are often associated with global warming, such as population growth, abuse of natural resources, traffic and pollution, very few of them actually mention the term itself. Among those who do, is twenty-two-year-old Shital, Vidya's daughter, who studies in Kullu College with the aim of becoming a teacher. In our conversation about the climate change Shital often

brought up the term explicitly. She had no doubt that “global warming” was the reason behind the lack of rain in 2009. In cases like this, when the speakers use the English term explicitly, what they usually mean to evoke is the scientific, that is, non-religious, non-traditional and non-theistic approach to the problem.

A fundamental epistemic struggle is taking place in contemporary Kullu Valley between traditional and scientific rationalities. Local tradition—“our system [*hamārā* system],” “our system of goddesses and gods [*hamāre devī devtā ka system*],” or simply “our culture [*hamārī saṃskṛti*]”—is perceived by locals to stand in stark contrast to “science” and scientific explanations of reality. This struggle, which can be found, for example, in issues pertaining to medical health and personal wellbeing, is most evident when it comes to thinking about the weather.¹⁸⁵ Here is an example from a conversation with Shivkumar, where we discussed the issue of the worsening climate:

Shivkumar: People are doing bad things. They commit sins [*pāp*]. So the goddesses and gods get angry.

Udi: And when they get angry, then what happens? Do they punish the people?

Shivkumar: Yes. They bring misfortune [*nuḥsān*]...they bring too much rain...They bring floods...

Udi: You mean that the gods get angry and then they give punishment?

Shivkumar: Yes, they give *sazā* [punishment]...But look, this is how we think about it. The approach of science is that nowadays cars are coming to the mountains, people are coming, the population is growing, and the pollution is growing. This is also true...

Udi: So what do you think? Which of the two [is the right approach]?

Shivkumar: If we followed our own way of thinking, then we would say that this [the climate change] is the result of the anger of the gods. If we followed

¹⁸⁵ Similar observations are made by Mark Elmore, who argues that struggles between local rationalities and scientific rationalism take place throughout the Western Himalayas. In a footnote to a story about a struggle between a certain farmer from Mandi and a snake, which turned out to be a deity, Elmore writes: “This story can also be read as a critique of scientific rationalism in the Western Himalayas. People are full of stories such as these where they operated on principals taught to them in schools (snakes are simply animals) rather than what they had been told in their communities (snakes are powerful deities that control weather and personal fortune). As such, the triumph of the snake in this story is emblematic of a broader struggle of local rationalities over those of scientific materialism” (Elmore 2005: 401, footnote 65).

what is going on these days [i.e. the spirit of present times] then we would choose the explanations of science.¹⁸⁶

Shivkumar identifies the two competing worldviews but is reluctant to decide (or to reveal his thoughts about) which of them is better. Others are less accommodating and more critical of the scientific worldview. Lotram, for example, a respectable figure in the village, who was for a few years one of Haḍimbā's *kāmdārs* (a group of people in charge of carrying out all kind of administrative and ritual tasks) explained the essence of the conflict between tradition and science in a very sincere and enlightening way:

Lotram: Today, the young people, they study a lot. The more they study, the more they say: 'What do the goddesses and gods say? This is nothing!' Science is stopping this [faith in the gods]. [The young say:] 'Our eyes are saying one thing. But books are saying another.' But that which the goddesses and gods are saying, this is natural. That which is written down, that which is science, it can also be duplicate [not genuine, not real]. Sometimes the story is ok, sometimes it is wrong. So how can we know? But that which the god is saying – this is natural. These are things that he is saying out of affection. This is why the mountain people have so much faith in the goddesses and gods.

Udi: And in science?

Lotram: Science... science is electronics...

Udi: So do you feel that the youth, they say 'now we should have science'?

Lotram: [Nods] nowadays, all the people think according to what is being said on the television: 'today the weather will be bad, today it will rain, today it will snow.' When we ask the goddesses and gods, they say 'why do you ask us? The television is saying this and that. Leave us alone!' [The gods thus ridicule the people for trusting media forecasts more than they trust the gods]. Who believes in them [in the gods] nowadays? In older times, our goddesses and gods, our God [Bhagvān], they were our mother and father. Mother and father. They were the givers of life. Just like the mother and father give life, so did the goddesses and gods. They were givers of life. Now, the news on the television, how do they know what will happen tomorrow, what will come tomorrow? They look at how the wind travels around – 'aha, the wind is coming from here, the wind is not coming from there...' - this is how they know. [However] The goddesses and gods, when they say that the rain is coming, it can come in one month, it can come in one week, it can also not come at all. This...it is like...I mean...you have to have faith! The one who

¹⁸⁶ Shivkumar, Haḍimbā temple, September 27, 2010, note d. Shivkumar, one of Haḍimbā's priests, clearly presents the essence of the two paradigms.

does not have faith, for him, the goddesses and gods are nothing (Lotram, Old Manali, December 22, 2010, note 1).

Science, according to Lotram, may be accurate, but it is all ‘electronics’ – a technical skill, unnatural, and devoid of affection and care. The predictions of the gods may be less accurate at times but they have a wholly different objective. It provides devotees with trust and security. They know that they are taken care of by divine motherly and fatherly figures. This is what the youth, with their studies, books and television - with their science - are forgetting. It used to be about faith, not about the direction of the wind.

Govind, to take another example, was quite explicit about the prospects of tradition and science coexisting. At some point in our conversation, from which I have already quoted at length above, Govind argued that I myself was a scientist interested in “practicalities” and therefore could not be a person of faith. Science and faith, he insisted, are two opposing things that cannot go hand in hand. I admitted that this was a good question that I was debating myself:

Udi: This is a good question, for me too, whether science and belief [viśvās] are indeed opposites, or maybe they can reside together. This is my question.

Govind: No! They can never reside together! [Govind raises his voice and states it decisively].

Udi: They cannot reside together.... You think that...

Govind: [Interrupting my sentence] they cannot reside together!!! [We both pause for a few seconds].

Udi: Why? Why do you say this?

Govind: It is like this - take water for example. Pour oil into it... [Govind pauses and signals that he is waiting for my response]

Udi: They don't mix.

Govind: They don't!

Udi: They will remain separate.

Govind: Yes. They will remain separate.

Udi: So this is how it is.

Govind: This is how it is.

Udi: Science and faith...

Govind: Yes.

Udi: Like water and oil...

Govind: Like water and oil (Govind, near Haḍimbā temple, April 6, 2011, note 3).

Thakur, to take a final example, a villager in his late forties, expressed a more complex view. Discussing the changing climate in the Kullu Valley, he drew on a rather scientific language. He argued that the rising temperatures were indeed a global phenomenon. He said that he saw on T.V. that the world's glaciers are melting and expressed concern for the future wellbeing of the Indian coastal cities like Mumbai and Chennai. He also explained that global warming (he did not use the English term) was the result of population growth and the rising numbers of cars, houses and 'fires' around the world (by which, I assume, he meant the increasing use of fossil fuel and firewood in the locality). But then he added the following:

On TV these days they say many things about the weather, but this is all *māyā* [illusion]. This is the *māyā* of the world. They say it is going to be like this, and then they say it is going to be like that [Thakur refers here to the weather forecasts]. This is how it is these days on TV, on the internet, with science. But they are often wrong [the weather forecasts are proved wrong]. This is the *māyā* (Thakur, near Manu temple, July 23, 2009, note d).

One has to admit that online sites that provide global forecasts are doing a fairly poor job when it comes to predicting the weather conditions in Manali. Their predictions are often quite far removed from what is actually happening on the ground (or in the sky above...). At times, the websites' description of the present conditions is the exact opposite of what one can see outside. In other cases, the websites change their predictions every several hours and seem to be chasing the weather conditions rather than actually forecasting them. Many locals, who have internet access on their mobile phones, monitor these reports, and spread the word around to those who do not have access. I was

repeatedly interrogated by locals about what the “internet” had to say about the prospects of rain, snowstorm or clear dry days. I was soon forced to admit that when it came to rain and snow in our area, the “internet” had no clue.

Locals, however, kept inquiring.¹⁸⁷ Soon it became clear that many villagers simply enjoyed ridiculing the farfetched online predictions. They were especially content and joyful when internet predictions faltered while the gods’ forecasts were right on target. A most telling example occurred during an exceptionally elaborate ritual (*mahāyajña*) that was performed in the town of Manali on behalf of goddess Durgā. The goddess’ temple, located in Manali’s main market, is only a few decades old but has already given rise to an impressive tradition of an annual week-long *yāg*, at the end of which a huge public meal is served for more than 20,000 people. Since the huge crowds are served outdoors, seated in long rows in several open grounds at the center of Manali, a clear and pleasant weather is an absolute must on the last day of the ritual. On April 2011, however, the weather was quite rainy even when the festival was already under way. The organizers of the event, most of them from Old Manali, were quite concerned that the bad weather would not clear up for the last day of the feast. Huge amounts of food had been bought, 30 Brahman cooks were hired, but the sky was still dark. On the day preceding the communal feast, the goddess Haḍimbā was scheduled to visit the market (carried in her palanquin), and spend the night and the following day at the Durgā temple. In the morning it was still raining heavily.

At around 10:30 AM Haḍimbā’s palanquin was ready to leave. The goddess was asked about the weather. Tirthram, Haḍimbā’s *kārdār*, petitioned her to clear up the sky.

¹⁸⁷ And I too kept checking. In the Kullu Valley I learned how, when we lack reliable sources of information, we keep returning to the unreliable ones since this is all we have.

He said that it would be a shame if they could not feed the people and ruin such a big ritual (the meal is an indispensable part of the ritual without which it remains incomplete and definitely unsuccessful.) Haḍimbā calmed the devotees down promising they would have nothing to worry about. Half an hour later, when the group began making its way to town, the rain stopped and the sky cleared up. It started raining again in the evening and poured down all through the night. The next morning, on the scheduled day of the feast, I wrote the following in my diary as soon as I woke up: “I got up to the sunniest day ever. The sky is clear, the sun is shining. It is relatively warm. A perfect day for the *bhaṇḍārā* [public ritual feast]” (field diary, April 13, 2011, note 1). And indeed, the day was perfect. Haḍimbā’s ‘fixing’ of the weather was the talk of the town:

Tirthram: We asked [Haḍimbā] ‘please clear up the weather’

Lotram: We said ‘this is your *jāg* [*yāg*]. Please, a little bit...’

Tirthram: ‘Do it completely...’ [fix the weather completely]

Lotram: See now, it has all cleared up!

Tirthram: In Kullu it is raining, in Kullu it is raining [the town of Kullu, 40 km away from Manali]. It is raining in other places too. And here, see for yourself! Yesterday the weather was so bad.

Lotram: It was written that it would rain, that it would snow.

Udi: Where was it written?

Lotram: In the newspaper...

Udi: In the newspaper?

Tirthram: Yes, in the newspaper, in this thing too, what’s its name...

Someone else: In the internet

Tirthram: In the internet too - a lot a lot [it was said that it would rain a lot]

Lotram: Now, look at the *mātā*... (Lotram and Tirthram, Manali market, April 13, 2011, note f).

The great joy accompanying the beating of the internet’s predictions reveals how powerful an opponent ‘science’ really is. Carried in education and books, newspapers and internet websites, electronic appliances and medical institutions – science, in locals’ view, offers a powerful competing paradigm to their own traditional one.

“Science,” as it is understood by villagers in Old Manali and Dhungri, designates a competing cosmological paradigm to the traditional holistic one. Manifested through media weather forecasts and in a set of ideas subsumed under the term “global warming,” science appears as an impersonal, unnatural, technical, and heartless force. It operates on a global scale in which the locality, any locality, has no significance. Neither the people, nor their gods, have any agency in this system, and humans’ moral or immoral behavior has no relevancy to the physical state of the world. Science, which is founded on rules and observations, may be accurate at times, but it provides no security, no sense of community and no mechanism to resort to when things turn bad. If the first line of reasoning, which blamed the changing climate on locals’ declining moral conduct, marks one end of the spectrum, then it is the third line of reasoning, which identifies ‘science’ as the competing paradigm for interpreting and engaging reality, that signifies the other opposite end.¹⁸⁸

Yet not all is lost. We must not forget that the three lines of reasoning presented above, while indicating growing concerns about the very validity of the local traditional worldview, do not necessarily mark an unequivocal linear process of disenchantment. In fact, as I have stressed above, these different perspectives are not entirely distinct and are alternately drawn upon by the same people sometimes during a single conversation. Devotees would move from admitting their own moral responsibility for the changing climate to blaming it on an impersonal remote ‘scientific’ process in a matter of seconds.

¹⁸⁸ Interestingly, in a recent blog-post about Americans’ engagement with Hurricane Irene, Stephan Prothero makes a very similar observation about how science has taken over people’s interpretation of extreme climatic phenomena. Whereas New Englanders in colonial times interpreted natural disasters “as punishment for their collective sins,” today “American society as a whole no longer interprets natural disasters as signs of some coming apocalypse or evidence of some past misdeeds.... Hurricanes and earthquakes are one arena ... where the language of science has almost entirely routed the language of theology” (Prothero 2011).

They would argue that it is the fault of their fellow villagers, who abandon tradition, and then, a few sentences later, would say it is due to the Kaliyug and the 2012 apocalyptic prophecy. They would then stress that it is the will of God [Bhagvān], or declare that nobody, including the gods, can do anything about it. Or that they can, but they won't. Or that they will, but only here in the Kullu Valley and to a limited extent. Reality, it turns out, unlike scholarly representations of it, is quite “messy.” This is nicely illustrated in the following conversation with Neel:

Udi: and if I ask the villagers, what will they say [about the reasons for the climate change]?

Neel: Most of the people will say it is because of the gods.

Udi: Not global warming?

Neel: No. They will talk about the abandonment of cows and the rise of sin in the world. They will say that the gods are punishing us for this.¹⁸⁹ Only the educated people will talk about global warming, those who got good education.

Udi: How many? I mean, what percentage of the people will say this?

Neel: I'd say 25% [Neel's friends, who are sitting in the shop listening to our conversation, nod in agreement]. Yes. 25% will speak of global warming. [Neel pauses for a moment while we all reflect on what he just said. He then adds the following:] But these 25% will also speak about the gods, the cows and everything else – it is because we believe in this. Around here, nothing happens without the gods (Neel, Manali market, September 28, 2010, note b).

How the Gods Deal: Two Case Studies

In what follows I will present two case studies in which the gods were ritually petitioned by devotees to alleviate particularly worrisome weather conditions. These case studies encapsulate the wide spectrum of reasoning discussed hitherto in the chapter, thereby giving expression to both the continuities and shifts in locals' perception of the relationship between gods, human morality and climate. Much has been written about the fascinating phenomenon of spirit possession, which can be found across cultures, places

¹⁸⁹ I will discuss this important claim about the abandonment of cows in the last section of this chapter.

and time.¹⁹⁰ It is beyond our scope to explore this topic in depth, but I should mention that the following discussion is guided by my understanding of possession as an exchange between a community of worshippers and those who serve as the mouthpieces of the gods. Communal memory, traditional ideals, lingual formulas, and novel realities are all blended together and worked out in an ongoing dialogue between the community and what it perceives as a divine voice communicated through human vessels.

The first incident took place fifteen years ago in a village named Shuru, about 7-8 km south of Manali. A long drought was unfolding in the area and villagers addressed the gods for help. I rely here on Daniela Berti's excellent account of this event. The second incident, which I observed myself, took place in 2011, when, following an exceptionally rainy season, a meeting of several local deities was convened in Haḍimbā's temple with the aim of deciding whether a buffalo sacrifice should be held in her honor, in order to halt the rain and ensure that similar conditions are not repeated the following year. As we will see, while in the first case, the main blame is put on locals and their illegitimate behavior towards each other and their gods, in the second case, the gods point to much deeper systemic problems.

Drought at Shuru Village, 1994

In June 1994, during the annual Ṭhorā festival, a dispute arose between the members of two villages, Banara and Prini. During the festival a special ritual takes place: Takṣak Nāg, the deity of Banara and a powerful rain god, competes against his younger brother, Phāl Nag, the deity of Prini, in a traditional palanquin race. The palanquins of the two deities are carried on devotees' shoulders and race along a 500-

¹⁹⁰ Two excellent recent publications about possession in India are Clark-Decès (2000) and Smith (2006).

meter course. The deity who reaches the target line first wins control over regional rains in that particular year. During the *Ṭhorā* of 1994, a group of villagers from Prini, seemingly a bit drunk, blocked the way of Takṣak's palanquin so that their own god, Phal Nāg, could win. In response, Takṣak's palanquin left the race without completing it and went straight back to the village. A fierce dispute commenced between the villagers as to whose fault it was that the ritual race was not completed. The Banara people argued that their god had every right to leave the race since his way was blocked by the people of Prini. The Prini people, on the other hand, argued that even though Takṣak's way was temporarily blocked, he should not have broken the tradition but completed the ritual as in every other year. Following this event, a serious drought developed in the area, and all the regional goddesses and gods, when interrogated about it in consultations, blamed it on this dispute. The members of the two villages, however, were reluctant to make peace and solve the conflict.

The tension kept growing during a number of local festivals that followed. The people of one village committed all sorts of inappropriate ritual actions in an attempt to offend the people of the other village. Thus, for example, both deities would arrive late to each other's festivals, purposely skip important ceremonies, and then leave early, without spending the night. The situation kept deteriorating and the drought dragged on. The area's deities kept blaming the people for the drought, announcing: "You have lost the truth; we have lost our power." They stressed that as long as the dispute was not solved, the drought would continue. Despite the grave situation no one seemed to be able to bring the two parties together and broker peace.

A year later, in June 1995, goddess Śravaṇī of the nearby Shuru village got into the picture. Communicating through her medium, the goddess brokered a series of six

consultations, at the end of which a compromise was reached. Berti reports on this series of rituals in great detail and nicely analyzes their inner dynamics. What is important for our purposes the following: First, whereas other deities insisted that they were powerless to act in this regard until the people solved their dispute, Śravaṇī claimed that she had an absolute command over the rains and purposely halted them until the dispute was over. Second, although the goddess occasionally scolded devotees for their generally inappropriate conduct, in this case, she insisted that the drought was a direct result of the specific above-mentioned dispute. Third, to reinforce this claim, the goddess kept pointing out that the drought hit only the area traditionally under the control of Takṣak Nāg, Phal Nāg and herself, while conditions in the rest of the valley remained normal.

Eventually, after a long and complex process, peace was achieved. A decision was made that a concluding *chidrā* ceremony (lit. ‘cutting’ or ‘breaking’ – a ritual meant to cut away one sins and thus end problems inflicted by a deity due to these sins) would be held, in order to put an end ritually to the conflict and to the ensuing sanctions imposed by the gods. A successful performance of the ritual—which necessitated the participation of the area’s gods, including Takṣak Nāg and Phal Nāg, and was jointly financed by all the parties involved—would indeed mean that the hostility was over. Śravaṇī assured villagers that the ritual would end the drought and the villagers announced that if she did not keep her word it would be considered her sin, in which case they would never gather in her honor again. As the *chidrā* was reaching its conclusion and the ritual meal was being served, a rainstorm broke with such a force that people had to run for shelter. They were especially pleased to learn that the rain was the heaviest in the area of Prini, and that outside the jurisdiction of the participating deities, the land remained dry.

This case study nicely illustrates the holistic worldview, in which humans, deities and ritual action are closely associated with weather conditions. The drought resulted from the breaching of ritual order during a rite in which gods and humans annually collaborate in setting divine control over the rain. The ritual error led to social disharmony that was immediately reflected in the climatic (dis)order. The human dispute impaired the ability, or according to Śravaṇī, the will of the gods to maintain proper meteorological conditions. Interestingly, as we can learn from the remarks made by both deities and devotees, the gods are no less dependent on humans for power and worship than the latter are dependent on them for good weather. Furthermore, everything in this case is highly localized. The interruption of a specific local ritual made the regional gods inflict punishment on a geographically-limited area, and the problem was eventually resolved through a series of rituals conducted within the locality. When the drought was over, devotees were eager to note that the rainstorm was confined to their territory. Finally, while villagers were often frustrated with the prolonged drought, neither they nor their gods lost their agency in this regard, or their faith in their ability to overturn the situation. At no time throughout this process did devotees question the validity of their system or doubted their understanding of the situation: a human dispute led to divine punishment in the form of a climatic disturbance. Humans, deities, ritual action and climate remained intimately linked.

Meeting in Haḍimbā's Temple, 2011

As I have previously noted, the rainy season of 2011 was exceptionally wet. The Apple crops were damaged and the preparations for winter (drying grass for the cows, etc.) were impossible to carry out. During a festival held in Banara village, Takṣak Nag declared that a buffalo should be sacrificed to Haḍimbā once again. Haḍimbā, however,

as noted in the previous chapter, refused. She was concerned that people would think that she had become too ‘hungry’ (greedy), and argued that in any event, devotees do not really offer this sacrifice sincerely and with good intentions. As the bad weather persisted, devotees decided to convene the gods in Haḍimbā’s temple for a consultation. They insisted that they would sacrifice the buffalo happily with the hope that Haḍimbā would put an end to the heavy rains.



Figure 9: Haḍimbā Devī’s and Manu Ṛṣi’s palanquin carried on devotees’ shoulders. Photo by Udi Halperin.

On April 20th, 2011 several of the area gods, represented by sacred censers and bells, arrived in Haḍimbā's temple in the late morning hours. Each delegation comprised priests, mediums, musicians and about ten-twenty additional men. The young men were wearing jeans and T-shirts, the older ones were dressed in traditional woolen coats. Almost all of them had colorful *topīs* (local caps) decorated with fresh flowers. The priests and mediums carried bundles of exceptionally colorful flowers, since it was springtime in Kullu and the flora were at their prime. Upon arrival the censers and bells were taken into the temple, where a small ceremony was already under way. The musical instruments were placed on the temple's balcony and the men sat down in groups, chatting, smoking *bīḍīs* and drinking chai (milk tea). A group of high-caste people from Old Manali were chopping onions, garlic and tomatoes in preparation for the afternoon meal that would follow the consultation. Behind the temple another group of people were setting fire to piles of wood over which huge cooking pots were placed. The sun was shining and the general atmosphere was quite cheerful.

An hour or so later the mediums changed their clothes to traditional *colās*, white short dresses of raw fabric, and wrapped long white cloth around their waists. Tuleram, Haḍimbā's medium, wore his *colā* over his coat. Once the mediums were all set, they went together to the side of the yard and urinated. They then washed their hands, took off their shoes and sat down in front of the temple's gate. A few of them were young. One was 80 years old, if not older. Manu Rṣi's medium had his long hair all spread out (all mediums must grow long hair once they are initiated,) and his back was covered with a few scattered flower petals. As he was holding the bell in his right hand one could notice the Om sign tattooed on its back. Haḍimbā's *celā* sat right next to him. He was wearing a unique traditional round brown *topī*, one of his famous markers, from underneath which

his long grey hair was peeking out. Like all the other mediums he too had a *tilak* marked on his forehead. The *celās* sat down with the censors and bells placed in front of them, together with a small pile of rice and a bunch of flowers. Behind them stood the musicians: drummers, horn blowers and cymbal players. The rest of the crowd was standing or sitting all around. A group of women was huddled together in the corner of the temple's balcony. A few curious tourists shot the event with their video cameras. At some point people signaled them to stop. The gods, they explained, are not keen on being filmed.

Rohitram Sharma, Haḍimbā's head priest, was sitting in front of the goddess, with a red scarf wrapped around his neck. But it was Tirthram, Haḍimbā's *kārdār*, who was doing most of the questioning. He held a colorful bundle of flowers in his hand and moved around a lot. A *thālī* (round metal plate) filled with flowers was brought out from the temple and placed on the ground in front of the *celās*. The drummers started beating the drums as the mediums started playing with their hair. Each of them, before getting into trance would pluck a few tresses from his forehead, inhale the smoke rising up from the burning juniper in the censor, pick up a few grains of rice, count them, and threw them in his mouth. The beating of the drums would then grow faster and faster and the medium would start shaking. At some point his *ṭopī* would fall off and he would get into trance. The music would stop and the consultation would begin. After each session with a particular medium, he would distribute flowers among the men sitting nearby and hand them a few rice grains, which they would count and put on their *ṭopīs*.¹⁹¹ Some of the mediums would speak very quickly, others would whisper. As soon as one completed his

¹⁹¹ The idea is to get an odd number of grains, which is considered auspicious. If this did not succeed right away the person would throw away the grains and ask for some more, until he got an odd number.

speech, the sequence would repeat itself: drums, trumpets, smoke, rice, shaking, and consultation. Manu Ṛṣi was loud and clear as he usually is. Haḍimbā, who spoke last, was rather brief. All throughout the consultation Tirthram kept pleading: “we need clear sky...we need the rains to be over... Tell us, what should we do? Tell us what work needs to be done and we will do it...”

Manu Ṛṣi, communicated through his *celā* Beluram, spoke at length. He referred to devotees’ eagerness to sacrifice a buffalo for Haḍimbā and to the fact that they were still waiting for her approval and instructions in this regard. However, he spent most of his time scolding people for their bad behavior, thereby bringing the bad weather upon themselves. He also expounded on what was yet to come. I quote this consultation in detail since, as we will see, Manu touches upon many issues that were raised by devotees in their reflections on climate change:

Manu: It is being said now that the End-of-the-World is coming [Manu is probably referring to reports in the India media about a prediction by an American preacher that the end of the world will occur on May 21st, 2011.]¹⁹²

People: Yes, yes, indeed we have heard about it.

Manu: But nothing has happened yet. There is no more love for children, no more fear of elders...but as for now, you people still have some love [for children and the gods], some love...[this is why the world still exists]... You have seen nothing yet, people, so far you have seen nothing... But now [he addresses the other deities around him] the mountain people are not satisfied with us anymore. Brothers, people are no longer satisfied with you. The new people that are coming now, they don’t even know how to treat us. Say [he addresses the crowd], is it true or not?

People: No no, it is not like this...

Manu: In older times, those who followed us, they did not forsake us... Now tell me, for what reason have you gathered here? You... you came for fruit and flowers [good crops] no? You people, you come only for your own interests, not for the sake of others...

¹⁹² The reports concerned a prediction given by Harold Camping, an American Christian radio broadcaster, according to which the Rapture and Judgment Day would take place on that date. This prophecy by an “American Guru,” as he was referred to in Old Manali and Dhungri, created much excitement in the village.

People: No no...

Manu: The cows have come here [to this world] to work for you [provide your needs], but you have beaten them and chased them away. Today, there is no more water¹⁹³ here!

People: [Repeat the observation made by the god to each other] no purity anymore, no purity.

Manu: Now listen to me [Manu raises his voice] - I have not come to take anything. I have created everything, and I will destroy it too. [Shouting] I have different forms - I am Brahmā, I am Viṣṇu, I am Śiva. Say, say, what are my forms? What are my forms? What are my forms? All this [the world around]... all this is my responsibility. In this way I have taken these forms on this earth. Now you can still say: 'nothing has happened yet.' I have told you people how this coming year is going to be... Now everything is going to be upside-down [*utal putal* – an idiom referring to a plowed land that has been broken and turned over.] It will be upside down.

Kārdār: So what should we do? What kind of work? I was thinking I will do it now [the buffalo sacrifice], but now the festival is coming [Haḍimbā's birthday festival in May], so I will do it after that.

Manu: I have already spoken about it. I have told you about the distant future. That which I have predicted, it has all come true. Now it will be the same, go! You people, you don't really want to do it [sacrifice the buffalo], you do not really want it.

People: No no. It is not like that.

Manu: Brothers, there is no real desire here [villagers do not really want to perform the sacrifice]... We don't want that.

Kārdār: What work should be done? What work?

Manu: Nowadays, you people no longer care about us. We used to tell you the truth, to impart knowledge on you. Today, you pay attention neither to these things [truth and knowledge] nor to us. You no longer possess the knowledge [*vidhī* – also tradition.] It used to be given to people and animals in the same way - we used to reveal ourselves to people, either inside or outside the house [everywhere.] But now, you are not satisfied any more. Nowadays, we show you our real form and still you don't have faith in us.

People: No no...

Manu: Nowadays, you have no faith, you don't believe. Nowadays, you eat things that are not fit for eating; you wear things that should not be put on. Speak, what have you done people? This is a temple here.... She [Haḍimbā] made penance here, the seven *ṛṣis* are here with me, near this temple. Everything is done here.... You have destroyed our sacred symbols [*niśān* – the paraphernalia of the deity carried in processions.] Whatever was saved, you destroyed it too.

People: No no.

¹⁹³ The gods, who often speak in symbolic language, use the term water to signify purity.

Manu: You did it for the sake of illusion [*māyā* – illusion, money]... On that day, in which the world will be destroyed, you will not even know about it [so sudden and abrupt it will be.]

People: No no.

Manu: This day will be like a dream for you, like a dream [so horrible that you would not believe it is happening]. You will not understand... Even now, I don't know, you people have a desire for produce and wealth, but this is *not* our worry. This is hardly our worry [we, the gods, are much more worried about *you*.] Do not forsake tradition and custom [*rīti rivāz*] completely! In all other places, even this little amount of tradition and custom are all gone.

People: Yes, this is true, in other places it is all gone, it is already finished...

Manu: You people, you no longer keep night from day [you have mixed the natural order of things.] But now this is how things are, nothing [you are not doing anything about it.] So what can we do about it? ... So Should I show you people a small spectacle [*tamāsā* – in this context: should I punish you]?

People: No, no.

Manu: I have told you this in the past, from behind the mountain. They [the other deities] told you that too. But you are not satisfied. It has reached here as well [sin and lack of faith]. But you people, you don't realize it. You people, you don't even realize how far it has reached... But I will tell you this - I didn't want to prevent it [the clear weather.] [I wanted to do] just like I have done in the past: keep the clear weather clear and the rainy weather rainy [but I was forced to do so by your behavior]. So today you lament? Today you realize it yourself. What will I say? But you already know about the clear and rainy weather from long ago. You hear about it in each and every house - so why do you ask? [Manu scolds the people for following the media weather forecasts.] Should I shake you a little bit?

People: No no!

Manu: [Then you will see] how much power we have. We are now just as we used to be. Just as we were present here during the Satyug, in the same manner we are present here now, during the Kaliyug. We [just] don't show ourselves to you anymore... She [Haḍimbā] she didn't want to do that, [inflict] the bad weather. But [she said:] what can I do? I had to do it a little bit... There used to be nothing here, in these mountains - only mountains and cliffs. We used to reveal only a small portion of Lakṣmī's face [we gave you only small amounts of money and wealth and you respected it and worshipped it as goddess Lakṣmī.] But you see now, nowadays this custom is all gone. Brahmans and ordinary people began doing things they have never done before [Manu blames all sections of society in committing sin, and hinting to the collapse of the social order itself]. Everyone has begun behaving in an upside-down manner. Say, isn't this the nature of the present?

People: [They all talk together] This is true, Manu Mahārāj... People's behavior is upside down... This is true, people are running after money... They do all kinds of improper acts [*ulṭā kām*] for money...

Manu: But even now, we [the gods] are in control. If we go away to the forest then we will never come back... We don't want to stay here... [If we leave] all that will be left here is inaccessible mountains and difficulties [*dhog*

duḥkha' – idiom marking an uncultivated and uncivilized land.] You have left so little common lands that it cannot even be seen [you have privatized and used all the common grounds.]

People: No no...

Manu: This is the thing, I have spoken with the goddess, but she keeps saying 'no!' [Haḍimbā does not want the buffalo sacrifice]. Should I shake you a little bit? Nowadays you don't follow the custom anymore.

People: No no.

Manu: But this is the thing, go go! We used to do justice with people but we can't do it anymore, since none of you follows the custom anymore. [The music starts again] (gathering near Haḍimbā temple, April 20, 2011, note 2i).

Once the consultation was over, devotees began discussing what was just said. They noted that Haḍimbā did not approve of the sacrifice and that although Manu petitioned her on their behalf she still refused. However, they did not despair and still hoped that the other gods would implore Haḍimbā to overturn her decision. Several villagers seemed quite positive that this indeed would happen.

The last to speak was Haḍimbā herself, communicating through Tuleram, her medium, the goddess scolded devotees for what guides their worship. She concluded by announcing her decision regarding the buffalo sacrifice:

Kārdār and people: What do you want? What should we do? Say, what do you want us to do?

Haḍimbā: Do whatever you want... I am afraid of you people. I am not afraid of the sages and seers [*Rṣi Muni*, Haḍimbā is referring to the other deities around], brothers, but I am afraid of you.

People: No no...

Haḍimbā: *Kārdār!* From the day the world was created, you people, you have given us things, dirty things, which should not be kept. You have come bringing us bad things. You have created a line. *Kārdār*, you reveal all your secrets to us while you are chasing illusions [*māyā* - Haḍimbā is probably referring to the way devotees line up before her, seeking her blessing and help in obtaining monetary goods while presenting her with all kinds of 'dirty things,' such as money]... I have maintained the custom of the 'sacrifice of eighteen' [*aṭhāraha bali'* - the buffalo sacrifice]... *Kārdār*, you don't desire it properly, you don't desire it properly... All you people, you have gathered here today because *you* want it. I did not want it [I did not request you to come.]

People: No no. It wasn't your desire [it was ours]

Haḍimbā: Stay away, it is good, sitting near...I didn't want. I didn't want. I didn't want. The calculations [predictions] for the future are even worse. It will be worse... I have eaten 51 sacrifices here, and still you are not satisfied [Haḍimbā may be referring here to a famous sacrifice that was performed here a few years ago when 51 sheep were sacrificed to her]...[Haḍimbā starts speaking in an old language that no one understands anymore]... But here is the thing. If you give happily, then...

People [all together]: Yes, yes...we will give happily...we will give happily

Haḍimbā: Then I will want it. But here is the thing, I have many forms. Eighteen, Eighteen - that many forms. I don't know who the raja is, I also don't know who the Maharaja is ['great king' - Lord Indra. Haḍimbā means she is very powerful and not accountable to anyone]. Will you give [the sacrifice] with one mind [together, with one intention, united]?

People: Yes, yes. With one mind. yes.

Haḍimbā: I am not afraid of anything... You people are here, but I am sitting high above. Whatever you say people. Gather joyfully, but here's the thing. I have no distress [I don't need it]

People: No no.

Haḍimbā: What do you say, brothers? Afternoon comes in night time, and in winter summer comes. The winter has become summer. The summer has become winter... (gathering near Haḍimbā temple, April 20, 2011, note 2j).

Haḍimbā, having agreed to accept the sacrifice, provides the date for the event.

The music starts and the consultation is over. Devotees are very pleased.

As we can see, Haḍimbā, and even more so Manu Rṣi, make various observations regarding the nature of the present reality in the Kullu Valley. The gods blame devotees for forsaking traditional values and practices, becoming greedy and chasing illusions. The bad weather conditions are presented as a necessary means for shaking villagers so they realize the results their misconduct will yield. The gods warn the people about the calamities that are yet to come and threaten to run away to the forest if people continue to mistreat them. Yet at the same time Haḍimbā and Manu also provide some comfort. They admit that there is still little faith left in the Kullu Valley, which sustains the world and keeps it going. Furthermore, while she blames devotees that they seek approval for the buffalo sacrifice for their own selfish needs, Haḍimbā eventually agrees to accept it and to act on villagers' behalf with regard to the weather. She and Manu remind people that

they are still very powerful, insisting that their influence has not diminished due to the progression of the ages. It is people's diminishing faith and their embrace of new customs and forms of knowledge, which prevents devotees from clearly seeing their gods in all their glory.

What stands out here in comparison with the previous case study we examined is that the bad weather is not blamed on any *specific* issue or event. The gods clarify that the heavy rains are a result of general degradation and the desertion of religious life. One is tempted to think that the fifteen years that have passed since the first case study, and the rapid deterioration in the climate conditions that accompanied this lapse of time, have diminished locals' confidence in their ability to control the situation. The growing disturbances may have weakened their sense of agency and responsibility for the reality of their lives. Yet it could also be the case that in the absence of any particular regional occurrence that could be blamed for the unfavorable conditions, the gods resort to more general accusations about cultural decline. In any event, it is fascinating to see how bad meteorological conditions serve here as a trigger for cultural, moral and social reflections by gods and community alike.

To sum up, in both the case studies presented above the holistic logic underlying perceptions of climate in the Kullu Valley is revealed. Bad meteorological conditions are understood to result from the improper behavior of humans, which propelled the gods to alter the weather as a punishment. In both cases the irregularities are addressed through a series of rituals perceived as a valid mechanism for setting things right. At the same time, whereas in the first case a particular human misconduct is blamed for the climatic disturbance, in the second case a deep anxiety is expressed about the sustainability of the system as a whole. Faith, love, and proper practice are on the wane, while illusion, greed

and new sorts of impersonal knowledge are advancing. The different interpretations presented in this chapter, which were offered by locals to the changing weather, lie along the spectrum that connects these two poles. In each explanation a different blend of particular local human behavior and the working of general impersonal processes is put forward. The gods, on their part, scold devotees and warn them about the looming, unavoidable approaching doomsday, while at the same time offering their help in solving the immediate problems. What the gods request in return is to be remembered, so they can continue protecting the people. Interestingly, we should note, despite the apocalyptic tone and the great worry expressed about the fading of tradition, the dialogue between the people and their gods is still taking place, and it is done in an age-old ritual setting, in front of an ancient forest temple, where the drums are still beating and people are still trembling in trance while communicating the voices of the gods.

The Cow and the Order that Once Was

Manu Ṛṣi: You drink the milk and eat the ghī [purified butter], but you abandon the cows (Manu Ṛṣi communicated through his medium, Manu temple, December 4, 2010, note a).

Sukharam: The people said ‘we need a little bit [of snow]’, so the god said ‘I’ll give you some within three days. But I will give very little, very light snow.’ The problem is that there are many cows roaming around and if it snows they’ll have nothing to eat, since the grass will be hidden under the snow. People don’t take care of the cows any more so this is how the gods protect them. If it snows then the cows won’t have food and they will die of hunger and cold. This is our fault. If people took care of the cows, kept them in their homes and fed them, then everything would be alright. If it snows, it will be a sin, which will stick to the gods (Sukharam, Old Manali, January 24, 2010, note 1).

The recent climatic changes are linked by both gods (communicated through their mediums) and people to a new inappropriate conduct of forsaking cows. The god Manu Ṛṣi of Old Manali as well as the goddess Haḍimbā and many other regional deities,

pointedly blame the people for thereby bringing the climatic changes upon themselves. The gods are not only angered by this immoral behavior of people but are also put in a very tough position. Halting the snow would disrupt agricultural cycles and harm humans. On the other hand, allowing the snowfall to keep piling up might implicate them in ‘*go-hatyā*’, the grave sin of killing a cow. Villagers explain that the gods are thus left with no other option but to drastically reduce the quantities of the falling snow.

The abandonment of cows, it turns out, is not just a metaphor for locals’ conduct but a real phenomenon. Villagers confirm that recent years have witnessed the desertion of cows by their owners in the surrounding forests for various reasons. Here is a villager’s confession in this regard:

Someone gave us a cow. Before that we had two cows, but they died...At that time I was pretty young. I was maybe in 3rd or 4th standard [class]. So we kept that cow in the house, but we lived near the road and we also didn’t have much space. Back then we also didn’t have the garden yet. So from where could we have taken the grass [for feeding the cow]? And so, we kept that cow for about two-three months, I think. We wanted to give this cow to someone else, but nobody wanted it. So then we took it [in a truck and threw it – the person explained this procedure earlier in the conversation]. It was near Jagatsukh, I think (male villager in his late twenties, Old Manali, September 21, 2010, note 1).

Others noted the fact that the cows found roaming around must have belonged to someone at some point. I once witnessed such a cow myself, which roamed the snow-covered field just outside my window in a futile search of grass. This was indeed a heartbreaking sight. Yet it seems that when speaking of abandoned cows people have more in mind than just this concrete practice. The reasons provided as to why people forsake their cows reveal a much deeper criticism of what went wrong in the Kullu Valley. But first let us recall the place of the cow in Indian culture.

The sacredness of the cow and the high esteem in which she is held in Hinduism are well known. The cow is highly revered, considered a seat of many gods and often referred to as ‘Mother Cow’ (*Go Mātā*). Her worship is central to Hindu practice and belief. William Crooke, the famous colonial Civil Service officer, ethnographer and folklorist opens a 1912 publication titled “The Veneration of Cow in India” by noting that “[o]nly those who have gained personal experience of the races of India can realize the widespread influence of the veneration of the sacred cow” (Crooke 1912: 275). The need to protect the cow has become a major religious concern for many Hindus, who regard her slaughter as the most heinous of crimes, and a rallying cry for Hindu nationalists for over a century. The central religious and political role played by the cow in Indian history has drawn much scholarly attention in the past several decades.

Marvin Harris’ writings on this topic in the 1960s and 1970s have sparked much debate. Taking a cultural materialist position, Harris argued that the sanctity of the cow and the resulting taboo on beef-eating in India grew out of the specific ecological conditions existing in the subcontinent. India’s case, he argued, was *not* one of “resource mismanagement under the influence of religious doctrine” (Harris 1992: 269), as many tended to think at the time. Rather, protecting the cow was a rational decree, given the techno-environmental base, property relations, and political organization existing in the country and the place of the cow within it:

[N]ot only did she give milk but she was the mother of the cheapest and most efficient traction animal for India’s soils and climate. In return for Hindu safeguards against the reemergence of energetically costly and socially divisive beef-eating foodways, she made it possible for the land to teem with human life (Harris 1987: 66).

In a low-energy, small-scale, animal-based ecosystem such as India's, argues Harris, living cows provided more calories than eaten ones. Thus, protecting them through cultural sanctification made perfect sense. Harris' analysis, which reduces the religious symbolism of the cow to a mere "calculus of calories" (Glücklich 1997: 189), was thereafter criticized by many scholars from other disciplines, who offered competing political, economic, psychoanalytical and even phenomenological explanations. These alternative explanations, argues Frank Korom, interesting as they may be, are no less reductionist than the one offered by Harris and fall short by explaining the sanctity of the cow "from within the narrow confines of their own respective disciplines." What all these interpretations "seem to overlook is the uniqueness of the cow as a deeply felt religious symbol in India. Nowhere else in the world has an animal maintained such status in the realm of the divine" (Korom 2000: 184).

Korom then moves on to tracing the history of the apotheosis of the cow in India while trying to answer another question that has occupied scholars in this regard – the history of cow veneration in India and of the restrictions on eating beef. He concludes that while the cow had enjoyed an elevated status already in the Vedas, it was not until the early centuries of the Common Era that she ceased to be sacrificed and eaten. It was only then that "the Brahmanical literature began treating *ahiṃsā* [nonviolence] as dogma." Even so, Korom observes, "the idea of practicing nonviolence on a mass scale was still met with popular resistance by the subaltern classes. It was not until Mahatma Gandhi utilized the cow as a 'poem of piety'... for his nonviolent struggle during the freedom movement that her position and status as a sacred symbol was firmly implanted in Indian soil" (Korom 2000: 188). Similar views are also expressed by Crook (Croke

1912), and even more so by D.N. Jha, a particularly provocative proponent of this view.

According to Jha:

[A]n average Indian, rooted in what appears to him as his traditional Hindu religious heritage, carries the load of the *misconception* that his ancestors, especially the Vedic Aryans, attached great importance to the cow on account of its inherent sacredness... In other words, some sections of Indian society trace the concept of sacred cow to the very period when it was sacrificed and its flesh was eaten [my emphasis] (Jha 2002: 18).

Jha provides a great deal of textual evidence that support his argument about the prevalence of cow slaughter and eating of beef in Vedic times. He mentions, for example, that serving beef to a respected visitor was a common and valued practice, to the point that Panini used the term “goghna” for a guest—literally “one for whom a cow is killed.” Jha also notes that “beef was the favourite food of the much-respected sage of Mithilā, Yājñavalkya, who made the obdurate statement that he would continue to eat the flesh of cows and oxen so long as it was tender (*aṃsala*).”¹⁹⁴ Like Korom, Jha too concludes that it was only from the early medieval period that “cow slaughter and the eating of beef gradually came to be viewed as a sin” (Jha 2002: 145).

Other scholars are less preoccupied with the history of the cow’s sanctity in India, than with its role in forging a sense of community among those who venerate it. The Cow Protection Movement is the case in point. The movement was launched in 1871, when members of the Sikh Kuka (Namdhari) sect, who had previously called for a violent resistance to the British for their foul habit of butchering cows, killed several Muslim butchers in Amritsar and Ludhiana. The British violently repressed the sect, but their cause—the protection of cows—was soon picked up by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj. In 1882, Saraswati founded the first Society for the Protection

¹⁹⁴ Jha (2002: 36). Jha refers here to Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa III.1.2.21.

of Cows (*gaurakini sabha*), which, in the following decade, quickly spread throughout North India. In 1893, around the time of Baqr-Id—a Muslim festival that involved the sacrifice of cows—severe riots broke out in U.P. and Bihar, and then in other places across North India. Similar agitations broke out again in 1912, 1913 and, most violently in 1917.

The central question here for many historians is whether the veneration of the cow and the willingness to actively protect her from slaughter were shared by all members of an *existing* well-defined all-India Hindu community, or, whether the Cow Protection Movement was one of the main forces that *created* this all-India community by forging together and creating solidarity between what was hitherto discrete parochial social groups based in caste and kinship alliances. Gyan Pandey famously argues that for the British, as well as for several historians that reproduced the colonial view, the violent disturbances concerning the protection of the cow signaled the communal nature of Indian society. According to this view, which Pandey criticizes, Indian society comprised of well-defined, all-India groups—mainly Hindus and Muslims—who each shared distinct religious sentiments and clashed over religious matters for centuries. In colonial eyes, the Indians were divided along the lines of old ethnic identities and, lacking any real agency in this regard, were bound by age-old religious (i.e. non-political and non-historical) categories.

Peter van der Veer, while taking a more nuanced stand, largely agrees that two such distinct communities indeed existed in India prior to colonial times and stresses that “[t]here can be little doubt that protection of the cow already had a political significance before the British period” (van der Veer 1994: 91). This, of course, is but one aspect of van der Veer’s larger argument concerning the religious basis of Indian nationalism.

While in Europe ethnic and lingual characteristics served as the legitimate markers of a distinct national identity, in India, van der Veer argues, languages were multiple and too diverse, and ethnicity was pretty much centered on religion. Thus, whereas in secular discourse (both colonial and contemporary) ‘nationalism’ is considered a legitimate political formation, ‘communalism’ is often criticized and delegitimized. The only difference between them is that “in nationalism it is a common ethnic culture that is imagined as such,” whereas “in communalism it is a common religion that is imagined as the basis of group identity” (van der Veer 1994: 22).

Pandey, as I mentioned above, disagrees. Analyzing the riots and the material conditions that preceded them in the relevant areas, he argues that the participating groups were not motivated by an all-India Hindu religious sentiment but rather by socio-economic and political interests. These interests were parochial in nature, having to do more with caste and kinship alliances than with any pan-Indian Hindu solidarity. Thus, for example, for many petty zamindars (landowners), rallying around the cow was an attempt to reassert status in a time when this status was being challenged, as well as an opportunity for marginally “lean” castes to gain prestige “by propagating their strictness on the issue of cow-slaughter” (Pandey 1990: 195). The lower classes joined the outbreaks for a host of reasons that did not necessarily have to do with a purely religious resentment to cow slaughter. The reasons that motivated them extended from the pressures put by their zamindars, through a fear of boycott and religious damnation, to identifying an opportunity for settling old scores, or for looting (Pandey 1990: 196).

Furthermore, Pandey argues that while the British interpreted the riots as an *outcome* of communalism, in reality it was the British Orientalist bias, which underlay

their production of knowledge and administrative actions, and which contributed to the emergence of the Cow-Protection Movement, that reified the two communities:

The all-India ‘Hindu community’ (and, to a large extent, the all-India ‘Muslim community’ too) was a colonial creation for, as I have argued, the social and economic changes brought by colonialism, Indian efforts to defend the indigenous religions and culture against western missionary attacks, the ‘unifying’ drive of the colonial state... and the very history of movements like that of Cow-Protection...tended to promote the idea of an all-India ‘Hindu community’ and an all-India ‘Muslim community’ which were supposedly ranged against one another for much of the time (Pandey 1990: 199).

The cow, therefore, was no doubt a pan-Indian religious symbol around which the Hindus rallied, only that according to Pandey they did so for parochial socio-economic and political reasons, rather than for all-India religious ones.¹⁹⁵

Whether Hindu communalism has existed in India for centuries or was consolidated only towards the end of the 19th century, by the early 20th century it seems to have been fairly well established. Crooke, in the 1912 publication already mentioned above, observes that “[o]n the whole, it may be said that reverence for the cow and passionate resistance to its slaughter are the most powerful links which bind together the chaotic complex of beliefs which we designate by the name of Hinduism” (Crooke 1912: 279). The protection of the cow remained an important aspect of the Hindu Nationalist agenda throughout the 20th century. Pinney, who studied the expression of this idea in the realm of print media and visual art, concludes that “the cow became an inclusive symbol that was also grounded simultaneously in an exclusional foundational violence,” and that

¹⁹⁵ Pandey (1983). See also the very similar chapter five in Pandey (1990). It is important to note that Pandey clarifies that he does mean to suggest “that ‘Hindu’ (and ‘Muslim’) interests or the notion of a ‘Hindu (or Muslim) community’ had no meaning for the vast majority of local castes, in the Bhojpuri region or elsewhere” (Pandey 1983: 198). Pandey’s point is that “until the nineteenth century at any rate, people always had to work through caste, sect and so on to arrive at the unities implied in the conception of the ‘Hindu community’ and the ‘Muslim community’ ” (Pandey 1983: 199).

it “came to represent a Hindu identity and nationality that required protection from non-Hindus” (Pinney 2004: 107). As such, this ideology keeps surfacing in contemporary Indian politics as well, and remains a volatile bone of contention. Interestingly, while the cow in the Kullu Valley does play a role in criticism leveled against outsiders, more importantly, it serves as a trigger for self-judgment. The cow, so it seems, is threatened here less by the Other and more by the Self.

The residents of Kullu Valley used to hold their cows in great esteem. Traditionally, the cow formed the backbone of the local subsistence economy and was of central importance to religious life as well. The cow’s products—milk, purified butter [*ghī*] and curd—figured prominently in the local diet. Her dung [*gobar*] was until recently the main agricultural fertilizer used in the fields. Even today the cow is often fed with household leftover food, thereby participating in the local waste-management system. In traditional houses the cows are kept on the ground floor, thus raising, with their body heat, the temperature of the whole structure during the harsh winters. In addition to her economic functions, the cow holds an important ritual role as well. Her dung and urine [*gomūtra*] are central to religious practices and are used for the purification of space, materials and people in various ritual settings.¹⁹⁶ Purified butter [*ghī*] too is a necessary component in almost every ritual, whether public or private, which is performed in the region.

Furthermore, in local memory and folklore the cow and her products occupy a central place. For example, and as we have already seen, butter is the main ingredient in the ritual reconstruction of Bijlī Mahādev’s *pinḍī* that is occasionally smashed by

¹⁹⁶ It is also an indispensable ingredient in all the weather-forecasting ritual mechanisms discussed above.

lightning. This conspicuous cow product thereby constitutes an essential component in the periodic reconstitution of the regional cosmos. According to another famous story, a malevolent king decided to substitute his daily dose of cow's milk with that of women's breast, which, following a strange sequence of events, he discovered he preferred. In order to keep a steady supply of women's milk he ordered that all the newborns in his kingdom should be killed on the spot, which would guarantee the flow of fresh milk in the direction of the king alone. This evil edict, together with the king's decision to dispense with cow's milk, quickly led to his downfall. The goddess Haḍimbā helped his competitor to overthrow him and take his seat. Many other stories, commemorating the revelation of local deities' statues, often involve cows, or milk, or both. Thus, in narratives too, the cow and her products are closely associated with locals' wellbeing, ritual action and divine presence.

The abandonment of cows, therefore, is a grave sin that does not go unnoticed by the gods. By halting the snow, they both protect the cows and punish the people for turning their backs on the emblem of their traditional life and core values. Interestingly, yet unsurprisingly, when expounding on the reasons that lead people to forsake their cows, locals point to a set of immoral behaviors intimately linked with the new economy and its guiding principles:

Parasram: Take the cows, for example. People abandon the cows. As long as they [the cows] give milk they [the people] drink this milk. But when they stop giving milk, people abandon them.... This is a very bad thing. It is for this reason that there is much less snow now (Parasram, Dhungri, September 14, 2010, note 2).

Udi: And in older times it wasn't like this? [People did not forsake the cows once they stopped giving milk?]

Chaman: No. Before it wasn't like this.

Udi: Why? What is the difference? [Why did the people change their ways?]
 Chaman: I don't know—probably because now the people are only running after money. Before, let's say someone had a cow that after five years stopped giving milk. OK. He would still keep the cow, give her grass and everything. But now, people don't want to give anymore. If someone has a cow, which suddenly starts giving only one litre or half a litre of milk every day, then he would throw her out. [He would think:] why should I spend? I give her grass and she gives me nothing (Chaman, Old Manali, September 21, 2010, note 1).

Utilitarian thinking and an instrumental approach to cows are said to have replaced earlier values of responsibility, sense of duty and plain gratitude. Whereas in older times villagers continued taking care of their cows even when the latter lost their economic value, nowadays they no longer see any reason for doing so. The cow, like the tradition it stands for, is becoming less and less relevant in the new capitalist economy that has swept the valley.

Such criticism, especially when leveled by elderly villagers, also signals the latter's own fears of being abandoned at old age. In a conversation with an elderly villager, who again blamed the lack of snow on the ill-treatment of cows, he went on and on about how old cows are left to themselves with no one to take care of them. It soon became clear that more than worrying about the cows, the man concerned about his own prospects and the possibility that he would be abandoned by his sons. Locals' occasional conversations about the Western pension system, where, as they often explained to me, "the government" rather than one's own progeny supports a person in old age, signaled their growing awareness of and possibly desire for alternative care systems that may liberate one from the traditional responsibilities in this regard.

All this indicates that the traditional values that had oriented people's treatment of their cows, as well as of their elders and of each other, are now substituted for utilitarian ones. It is important to mention that, no doubt, it is hard to determine whether peoples'

recollections of the past are completely reliable—that is, whether the attitude towards cows and people was indeed less instrumental in the past. Yet the consistency and frequency of such reminiscences do seem to indicate that locals used to be more accommodating and willing to help one another even when there was no immediate gain involved. In any event, what is important here is that people *experience* their relationships as changing and that they are positive that it has devastating consequences for the climate.

The cow, which symbolizes the very essence of local life, is also a marker of traditional identity. As we have seen above, taboos on sharing of food are at the core of the caste system in the Kullu Valley, as they are elsewhere in India. In a society where strict regulation of food-sharing customs is one of the central cultural mechanisms for maintaining social structure, refraining from eating beef is a clear marker of what separates the Self (locals) from the Other (non-Hindu foreigners). In fact, the importance of the cow as a signifier of identity, and the intensity of emotions attached to it, were revealed to me personally in one of the most difficult and formative moments of my ethnographic research. Indeed, from the very beginning of my fieldwork, negotiations of my ‘social status’ and the degree of access I was granted to the social and religious life of the community, were often played out in food-related arenas. As discussed in the previous chapter, sitting arrangements during public events in the village are predicated on caste divisions, and thus serve as an arena where participants’ social status is publically displayed. I was ordered more than once not to dine in proximity to higher-caste people, and was never assigned a fixed sitting position. Throughout my fieldwork my place in communal meals kept shifting, thereby reflecting the ongoing negotiations of my position and of my status within the village.

The following incident, unusually blunt in its exclusionism, took place at the peak moment of the Daśahrā festival, when, following a forty-kilometer journey to the town of Kullu, the goddess Haḍimbā, manifested in her travelling palanquin, along with her officials and myself, were all seated in the private living room of the King of Kullu. At some point, one of Haḍimbā's *pujārīs*, noticing that I was writing my fieldnotes from right to left (I often write in Hebrew, my native language), initiated the following conversation:

Pujārī: So this is like Urdu?

Udi: Yes, it is like Urdu. But it is Hebrew [I mean that Hebrew, like Urdu, and unlike Hindi, is written from right to left].

Kārdār: So you write backwards [*ulṭā*].

Udi: No (I laugh). In my mind this is straight. In my eyes Hindi is written backwards.... But yes, it is backwards, it is like Urdu.

Pujārī: Are you a Muslim? [Urdu, a close variant of Hindi, is the language associated with Muslims in India]

Udi: No, I am a Jew. Yahudi.

[I am omitting here a short section of the conversation in which we discussed how many Jews are there in the world and whether they are typically rich or not].

Pujārī: So we can't sit and eat with you!

Udi: What? Why?

Pujārī: You are *down*, we are *up*!

Udi: Oh...

Pujārī: Yes!

Udi: Well.... I guess there's not much I can do about it...[This blunt attack takes me by surprise. I am quite stunned at this point and looking for a way out].

Pujārī: From now on, whenever we eat, you should sit separately [not with us].

Udi: Aha...

Pujārī: Don't sit with us! [Everyone around us is nodding in agreement]

Person 1: We don't eat with Muslims.

One of Haḍimbā's officials: Write it down in your notebook.

Udi: What should I write?

Pujārī: That we have forbidden you to eat with us. Because we are Hindu and we don't like you. Write it down.

Udi: I don't need to write it down, I will remember.

Pujārī: Keep it in mind!

Person 1: This is because Muslims and Christians eat *beef*. They are *beef eaters*.

Pujārī: We hate them!

Person 1: We do not sit with those who eat beef. Eating cow's meat is not allowed.¹⁹⁷

Many locals still refrain from sharing food or even sitting next to beef-eating foreigners, let alone invite them to their homes and kitchens. Yet as one villager once complained, nowadays people relax these restrictions the closer they get to foreigners. They start, he said, by sharing food with tourists while guiding them on treks, then they sit with them in restaurants and finally they invite them to their homes and even inside their kitchens. The boundaries between the Self and the Other are thus eroded and local identity markers are abandoned, just like the cows.

Cows in the Kullu Valley embody a traditional way of a life, in which identity, moral conduct, ritual action, economy and ecology are all interconnected. The cow, as a living being, as well as an ideal symbol, ties these elements together into one comprehensive whole. In recent years, however, locals' commitment to their cows and to the values they represent is on the wane. The cows' economic value is in decline, turning them in the eyes of many into a liability rather than an asset. As a result, there is a growing tendency among villagers to abandon their cows in the forests. At the same time, the growing presence of tourists in the village has entailed increasing contact between locals and foreigners, in which the traditional restrictions on sharing food with people who eat beef are relaxed.

These two phenomena, both of which signal a gradual departure from older values and sense of identity, invite the rage of the gods with regard to the desertion of cows. The gods are not willing to become part of this process and intervene to defend the cows by

¹⁹⁷ Haḍimbā *pujārī*, Kullu palace, September 28, 2009, note 1. It should be noted that since this incident, which took place in 2009, I learned how to 'navigate my caste' much more successfully, and managed to find ways to both secure access to high-caste people and retain close relations with low-caste members of the community.

altering the weather and halting the snow. The gods thus function as the community's alter ego, recalling the centrality of a traditional sense of solidarity, responsibility and identity, that is threatened by this new set of economic imperatives and ideals.

Conclusion

Residents of Old Manali and Dhungri are perplexed. In the past several decades, and with even greater intensity during the last twenty years, their lives have undergone far-reaching transformations. Economy, lifestyle and worldview had changed, reshaping the realities of life in the valley. The introduction of a cash-crop economy and of tourism has brought great wealth to the region, which is enjoyed by many. Villagers seize the new opportunities, pursue wealth and appreciate the virtues of prosperity. At the same time, they also experience the downside of the new capitalist economy and resent many of its implications: alienation, competition, degrading morals, a declining sense of agency and of control over one's locality, and creeping doubts concerning the continuation of divine providence.

Coincidentally, perhaps, this process has been accompanied by a concomitant destabilization of weather patterns, which has resulted in growing uncertainties and fears. While traditional ritual mechanisms aiming to correct the weather irregularities are still employed, doubts seem to sneak in as to whether these mechanisms, as well as the holistic paradigm on which they are founded, are still valid. It is fascinating to see how the climatic disturbances serve as a trigger for social reflection and critique. Locals take this as an opportunity to evaluate the transformations in their lives and to express their resentment towards much of it. Their anxieties are communicated during charged ritual moments, when the possessed human mouthpieces of the gods deliver messages that both

reflect and now direct the community's collective interpretations of the new reality. Through their mouthpieces, the gods remind their devotees that if they lose their faith in their goddesses and gods and forsake the old ways of tradition, they will lose divine protection and all hell will break loose.

The concern voiced by the gods is justified. New technologies, media channels, education and tourism have introduced in to the region the concept of science, which is understood to offer a competing paradigm that undermines the traditional one. Indeed, a broad process of disenchantment seems to be unfolding in the Kullu Valley. To varying degrees, the language and practices of science are integrated into people's lives. Modern healthcare operates side by side with traditional healing systems, science lessons are taught in school while religious sentiments are cultivated at home, and internet forecasts are consulted while at the same time they are criticized in the predictions of the gods, which people also continue to seek.

The process is still under way and it is not at all clear at this point what the future holds. Will the residents of the Kullu Valley abandon their goddesses and gods as they are abandoning their cows? Will faith decline, rituals disappear, and media reports replace divine messages? Whoever visits the Kullu Valley must admit that a complete break with tradition seems unlikely. As Neel nicely summarized it, most people in the region still strongly believe in their gods. At the same time, however, education, media, and tourism are on the rise. Locals are exposed to new ideas, and their horizons rapidly expand. The region is subjected to external influences and to the working of global forces; it is changing quickly. What will happen in the Kullu Valley—how the old and the new will blend here—still remains to be seen.

All that is clear, perhaps, is that the time of the cow has passed—that is, the time when the welfare of the cow could be accepted as the measure of all things. It is said in Kullu and elsewhere that in the original world age, the Satyug, the cow of dharma stood firm on all four legs; in every successive age she has lost a leg. It is likely that the divine economy the cow once implied—an ideal economy, whether one regards it as fact or fiction—can never be restored. But does that mean the gods have been abandoned, or that they have abandoned human beings?

By no means. Chaman, reflecting on the value of science one day, went so far as to say he thought scientists these days could to some extent control the climate—even generate or stop the snow. The only thing he could not understand was the point in all that: “You see,” he said, “previously, it was also like this. People went to the gods. The gods said ‘we will give you the snow’ – so they gave the snow. They were doing the same things before” (Chaman, Old Manali, January 22, 2011, note 2). That sense of stable continuity is now lost—a time when, as Chaman assumes, those who understood the workings of this world in its broadest dimensions were also capable of managing and controlling it. If scientists can intervene in the operations of nature, as he concedes, that is also true of the gods, but in both cases there now seem to be limits. The gods can intervene, yes, they can fix, but can they order in a more comprehensive way? To put it in the traditional way, on how many feet does the cow of dharma stand?

CONCLUSION: Recasting Marginality

The Kullu Valley is changing rapidly. And yet in many ways it remains true to its old traditions. Local people are suspicious of the transformations introduced so quickly in their lives, critical of some of them, yet embracing many as well. They take advantage of the many new opportunities opened for financial growth, social reforms, material development and connection with the wider world. What is fascinating about Kullu is the complex ways in which traditional worldviews and ways of action orient locals in their engagements with their changing reality. Past traditions, though under attack in some cases, are not discarded but upheld, guarded, and often celebrated. At the same time, the new conditions, though widely criticized, are not rejected but embraced and integrated into people's lives. The old and the new, the local and the global, the religious and the scientific, the traditional and the modern—all interact here on a daily basis and remain in constant conversation. Central to this process is the goddess Haḍimbā, who assumes many roles in it. She is perceived as an agent leading and orienting the process, a subject molded and remolded in its course, and a ground for expressing, displaying, and negotiating it when necessary. A Mahābhārata figure famous for her boundary-crossing, who underwent substantial transformations and yet retained much of her original character, Haḍimbā seems perfect for this task. She enables her people, in the lives of whom she is so deeply embedded, to connect to the cultural and economic center while retaining their mountain identity with pride—not exactly peripheral in local understandings, but somehow enduringly at a distance, above the fray. At the same time, however, she signals a warning. Just as Haḍimbā's alliance with the kings of the plains elevated her status but resulted in the sacrifice of her son, so too may the people of Kullu

be forced to pay a price for their ambiguous but increasingly intense association with the *nīce vale*, the people "down there" and the wide world they symbolize.

Examining the three theaters of change discussed in the dissertation, one realizes that they also tell of an attempt to recast marginality. The natives of the mountainous Kullu Valley, whose encounter with the world that lies outside their region has intensified considerably in recent decades, have become increasingly aware of the peripheral nature of their region and the often unflattering ways in which it is perceived by outsiders. Unwilling to accept this state of affairs at face value, locals have been struggling to find a place for themselves at the pan-Indian and global table. Each of the chapters illustrates a different tactic that is employed by them in this struggle against different sorts of narratives, which, if accepted as being authoritatively hegemonic would render them peripheral.

In the first we saw how by highlighting Haḍimbā's Mahābhārata association, residents of the Kullu Valley offer an alternative epic frame for national and religious identity, as against a pan-Indian religious mentality one might call Purāṇic, for which Durgā stands as an example. In the second chapter we saw how, while appreciating and to some extent embracing elitist Brahmanic ideals of non-violence, Haḍimbā's devotees nevertheless insist on keeping, and even celebrating, the age-old tradition of sacrificing buffaloes to the goddess. They seek to justify, protect, and retain what they perceive as an essential and legitimate aspect of their ritual system, even if others see it as primitive and backward in nature. In the third and last chapter, the framework in relation to which locals need to resist being marginalized exceeds the boundaries of India and Hinduism. Struggling to explain the changing weather patterns in a way that retains and even

emphasizes the control exerted by local goddesses and gods, villagers occupy a number of positions on a spectrum of ideological frameworks that runs the gamut from local to global. What is important to notice here is that the local understanding of the weather, though challenged by external narratives on climate, is not forsaken but retained and creatively integrated with a host of competing theories and explanations. Cumulatively our three chapters show that marginality is being recast in the Kullu Valley in multiple arenas and in various ways. In each arena we see how a sense of potential marginalization is being resisted through religious means—or if some sense of peripherality is accepted, it is recast in ever-changing ways as a matter of honor, not shame. The tactics are many, and all of them intimately that involve goddess Haḍimbā.

Throughout our study lots have been investigated, not only the continuous, intimate and intense relationship of the people with their goddess, but what it reveals about the perception of divinity that they hold. The *devī devtā* of the Kullu Valley are considered by their people to be free and powerful agents who may forsake them and leave for the forest at any time. Yet as long as they remain in contact with humans, they are also dependent on them in several fundamental ways. Temple worship and sacrifices are the obvious examples, but the institution of the palanquin is an ever more interesting case in point. The gods in Kullu are literally carried on their devotees' shoulders in a movable structure that has been built and rebuilt by humans for centuries. At the same time, the palanquin becomes 'alive' only on the condition that the gods, invited by musical mantras, enter it and guide its ways along the mountainous trails. In the Kullu Valley, thus, divinity functions as a collaborative enterprise in which both humans and gods have to take part. Another feature of this broadly collaborative perspective is that the *devī devtā* are understood to represent themselves not by one but by multiple masks

(*mohrās*). The context in which this happens—one that is shaped by time and place, agendas and desires, memories and powers—determines which of these faces are foregrounded and which are made to recede. By means of this multiplicity of self-projection, the inherently unstable and broadly interactive relationship between divinities and human beings attains ongoing expression. As with so much that we have studied in these pages, it is a theater in which the margins shift, and in which that very shifting becomes a resource for dealing with a sense that life itself is a matter of margins—life itself, and not just the margin that is marked when “the people from below” perceive the world in which the people of Kullu and their deities live.

This aspect of religion in Kullu—the material side of religious life—which I have only touched upon briefly in my dissertation, should be further explored. Whereas here I have focused mainly on religious discourse and on what people had to *say*, in my future study I intend to focus on practice and highlight what people in Kullu *do*, examining the more tangible aspects of the cult of Haḍimbā. I hope to explore the dynamics of the *rath*, with its accompanying retinue of musicians and bearers of paraphernalia as well as the complex system of duties involved; the popular practice of processions and the rich set of customs that guide the movement of people and their deities in space; the increasingly popular ritual of inviting the *devī devtā* to one’s home for a festive day-long celebration; and the elaborate network of *devtā sthāns* that are spread across villages, fields, and forests and whose worship is a world in itself. All these are fundamental aspects of religion in the Kullu Valley that deserve a much closer look than I have been able to provide here.

A second issue that emerges from my work, and which I also intend to explore further in the future, is the nature of Himalayan religion, broadly speaking. In this

dissertation I have studied the goddess Haḍimbā and the life of her devotees as they take shape in the upper Kullu Valley. As we have glimpsed at various points, however, the Kullu Valley is by no means a place to itself; it participates in wider patterns of culture, commerce, and religiosity and has done so for many centuries. The two and a half years I have spent in the Kulle Valley make clear how much work remains to be done on the nature of religion in these majestic mountainous regions. We should, of course, better describe the rich and complex systems of belief and practice that are becoming increasingly accessible to both tourists and scholars alike, as transportation, technology and the state extend their grasp deeper and deeper into the mountains. But our main task is to go beyond mere description and answer some broad yet fundamental questions: to what extent is religion in the Himalaya tribal, Hindu, or Pahari? How distinct are these elements and how have they interacted throughout history, up to the present? How distinct are the separate regions of the Himalaya in terms of religion or do they, instead, constitute a recognizably uniform entity that is different from that of the plains? If so, how is this regional religion changing as pan-Indian and global forces advance?

As one can see, these are broad questions, but one can also see how closely they are bound up with the questions of marginality. Only by clarifying the strength that is provided to the people of Kullu by their sense of belonging to a shared religious culture that is much broader than what they practice locally can I come to an understanding of the full resources they command when they confront a sense of being at the edge. To be Himalayan, after all, is potentially to be at an edge that towers over the rest of the world—to be more intimately connected to divinity than people who live elsewhere. How is this so? How does Haḍimbā make it so? I hope that in this dissertation we have come a

considerable way toward answering this question, but as so often in a mountainous setting, there are still more steps to climb.

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