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# Ritual Kingship, Divine Bureaucracy and Electoral Politics in Kullu

Daniela Berti

In the years following Indian independence, hundreds of Hindu kingdoms that had been integrated since the sixteenth century into the Mughal and subsequently the British Empires officially came to an end. To paraphrase Galey (1989), the disappearance of these kingdoms did not necessarily provoke the disappearance of kings: royal rituals continued to be celebrated while many members of royal families became political leaders. The persistence of kingship in democratic India is the subject of a recent book by Marzia Balzani (2003), who shows how the descendants of the Jodhpur royal family have partly maintained their prestige both on a ritual and on a political level<sup>1</sup>. In this context, royal ceremonies are still periodically performed by the *rājā* in the luxury hotel-palace of Jodhpur; however they only involve a limited circle of the nobility and not the rest of society.

In this chapter I will present a different picture of "modern kingship". In the former Hindu kingdom of Kullu, in the state of Himachal Pradesh in northern India, the current head of the royal family has entered politics and maintains an important ritual role, which is not limited to the activity that he privately performs in his palace. He has close relations with the villages of the region, through his links with village deities called *devī-devtā*. These deities are considered to be local "kings" in their own right, who rule over specific territories<sup>2</sup>. Each of these village deities is strictly linked to a specific group of high- and low-caste villagers, with different roles: priests, mediums, temple administrators, musicians, and devotees. Each participates, in his own way, in what is locally called (using an English expression), the "deity system". The logic of this system is that village deities are considered responsible for bringing good or bad fortune, adequate rain and sunshine, drought or an abundance of rain, as a direct consequence of their respective devotees' actions. The king, too, is thought to be subject to the bad or good influence of these deities, both in his private life and with respect to problems affecting the whole kingdom.

In other work (Berti, forthcoming), I analyze how relations between the king and these village deities are today considered to be subject to political interference, due to the fact that the king is competing in local

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<sup>1</sup> For other works on contemporary forms of Indian kingship see also Mayer (1991), Hurtig (1988), Price (1996).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vidal (1988), Berti (2003) and, for the Tehri Garhwal, Sax (1991).

elections and that the deities' jurisdictions correspond to "vote banks" for which local politicians compete<sup>3</sup>. In the present article, the focus is rather on the Kullu king himself, and on the ritual dimension of his relations with the local gods and their villagers.

### Raghunāth's Staff Bearer

In 1852, during the British administration, the heirs of the Kullu dynasty lost the title of *rājā* when the throne passed to Thakur Singh's illegitimate son, Gyan Singh. Though such a succession was not uncommon in Hindu kingdoms, the British administrators, who had to confirm the honorific attributions, decided to refuse Gyan Singh the title of "*rājā*" and to give him the less honorific title of Rai. Rupi was the area given as *jagir* by the colonial authorities to Thakur Singh, which was repossessed by the Indian State in 1950. But even after this final loss of all their titles and privileges, the descendants of the Kullu royal family continue to be called "*rājā*" by most local people. Even the entrance gate to the palace in Sultanpur, the ancient part of the town of Kullu, bears the engraving "*rājā* of Rupi". It is in this sense that I shall use the term here.

The present *rājā*, Mahesvar Singh, is a politician. He started his career in 1977 as a member of the Hindu Nationalist Janata Party, predecessor of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), when he was elected as MLA in a local constituency. In the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP gave him the ticket for the Mandi Constituency, a large territory that includes, amongst others, the ancient territories of both Kullu and Mandi. He seemed to be the ideal candidate: in Kullu he was the *rājā* and in Mandi his sister had married the local *rājā*. He served many times –the last time being from 1998 to 2004, when he was defeated by a member of another royal family, Rani Pratibha Singh, contesting on behalf of the Congress Party<sup>4</sup>. Mahesvar's younger brother, Karan Singh, is also a political leader. He has served many times as both MLA and Minister in local government. Both brothers live with their respective families and their mother in their palace in Sultanpur.

The palace is directly connected to a royal temple through a private passageway meant for the royal family and their servants, while ordinary devotees and occasional pilgrims enter the temple from the outside. In the temple's courtyard, a sign informs the visitor, "This temple is the private

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<sup>3</sup> Berti, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Rani Pratibha Singh is the wife of the current Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, Virbhadra Singh, who is the current descendant of the Bushahar royal family, a kingdom nowadays included in the Shimla district. She is also Mahesvar Singh's affinal relative.

property of Bhagavan Singh" (Mahesvar Singh's grandfather). As a matter of fact, and in contrast to the neighbouring kingdom of Mandi whose *rājā*, after Independence, abandoned the temple to the state, the Kullu *rājā* has carefully safeguarded his ownership of the temple. It is dedicated to Raghunāth, the *rājā*'s personal deity, and the god on behalf of whom Kullu kings have ruled since the seventeenth century, calling themselves his "*charībārdar*" (Staff Bearer). Mahesvar Singh considers that it is his hereditary duty to maintain worship to Raghunāth, and he has recently appointed his eldest son, the *Ṭikā*<sup>5</sup>, as the *kārdār* (administrator) of the temple.

Inside the temple, nearly ten persons are employed at Raghunāth's service. The priest in charge of worship serves the god in his little metal statue four times a day. In the morning, the god is awakened and bathed, his make-up is applied, he is dressed in his royal dress and jewellery, and given a meal inside the royal kitchen. At night he is put to bed. During the day, he seats on his throne with his wife *Sītā* to his right and the god Hanumān standing in front of him in a position of devotion.

Every morning, Mahesvar Singh's mother, the *Rānī* (queen), attends the main worship while preparing a garland of fresh flowers for the god and playing devotional songs recorded on cassettes for him. The *Tikka* is also often there, and checks to make sure that everything is done properly in order to satisfy the needs of the god and of his divine entourage.

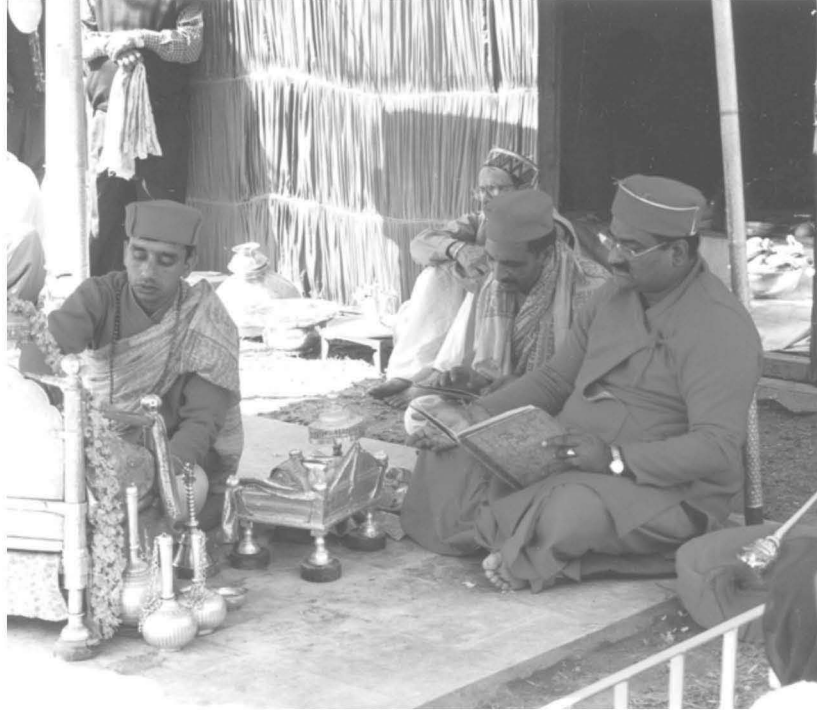
On ordinary days the temple sees few visitors, with only a few devotees living in Sultanpur coming in the morning to take the god's *prasād*, or to have his *darśan*. One exception to Raghunāth's quite confined ritual life is the yearly *Daśahrā* festival, when villagers from the whole district and from even farther away come to the capital with their respective deities' palanquins in order to pay homage to the god and to his human delegate, the *rājā*. In past times, this annual visit was compulsory, and was also the occasion for village deities to pay their tribute to the *rājā* as a sign of their political subjugation. Nowadays, village deities are sent an invitation by the *Daśahrā* committee, which also provides them with some money for their six-day stay at the capital.

*Daśahrā* has now been declared a National festival, under the control of the state's elected representatives who are the main members of the *Daśahrā* Committee and who make use of the festival for political purposes (cf. Berti 2005). When Mahesvar Singh was MLA or MP, he was also the President of the Committee and had thus everything under his control. However, even though he is no longer in power and even though the

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<sup>5</sup> *Ṭikā* is the common appellation used for the king's eldest son, Danvendr Singh. The word *ṭikā* indicates the vermilion mark that is put on the forehead during the puja. It is also a woman's ornament.

Committee is presided by Congress representatives, Mahesvar Singh still plays a central role in the ritual celebrations as Raghunāth's Staff Bearer: dressed as a *rājā*, he holds the Raghunāth's sceptre, is carried in a royal palanquin, and presides over a royal *darbār* (royal assembly) with village deities in attendance. At times, he is also dressed as a priest, takes a direct part in Raghunāth's worship, personally applies the makeup to the divine couple (Raghunāth and Sītā), reads them appropriate Sanskrit mantras, rocks them in their swings, fans them, etc.



**Fig. 1: The raja (on the right) dressed as a priest reads Sanskrit mantras to Raghunath who sits on the throne. (Photo D. Berti)**

For a *rājā* to act as deputy to a god to whom the kingdom has been transferred has been quite widespread practice in different Hindu kingdoms since the twelfth century, and has been interpreted by some scholars as a way for the *rājā* to centralize and legitimate his political

power.<sup>6</sup> H. Kulke (1986b), for example, in his reconstruction of what he calls the royal "deputy-ideology", analyses the dedication of the Orissan Empire to Jagannatha of Puri in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in terms of "vertical" and "horizontal" legitimation.<sup>7</sup> This kind of interpretation has been criticized by Schnepel as being "a Western, 'Machiavellian' view of society." (Schnepel 1994: 160). In contrast to such perspectives, what this author considers to be important is that, without denying that kings "were aware of the political consequences of some ritual acts, and [that] they made deliberate political use of this knowledge.... [it would be wrong] to ignore that their deeds with regard to the patronage of goddesses were also and even essentially, religiously motivated." (*ibid*: 161)<sup>8</sup>

In the case of Kullu, this coexistence of political and religious dimensions appears quite clearly in the multiplicity of meanings that Raghunāth condenses for the king: he is his personal god inherited from his ancestors, the religious symbol of past kingship, the supreme god and hero of the Ramayana and also, in the local context, the god to whom all village deities owe respect and consideration.

On the other hand, the political advantages that the king gains by worshipping Raghunāth are frequently evoked by local people (especially the *rājā*'s personal or political enemies). In the years following Independence, for instance, Raghunāth's worship was at the centre of a dispute between the then *rājā* of Kullu, Mahendar Singh, and Lal Chand Prarthi, who was minister and MLA. Prarthi often disputed Mahendar Singh's right to exert a monopoly over Raghunāth's rituals. He wanted to put the god's worship under the government's control. In the course of one of their disputes during a procession, which provoked police

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kulke (1986b), Waghorne (1989), Haynes (1990).

<sup>7</sup> By "vertical (or internal) legitimation" the author refers to "the acknowledgement by the king of the dominant autochthonous deities [that] will be aimed at the consolidation of the newly established sub-regional power within the nuclear areas" (Kulke 1986a: 136) while horizontal (or external) legitimation concerns the recognition of the king "by equivalent rivals and potential rioters amongst the feudatories" (*ib.* : 137).

<sup>8</sup> It may be noted however that these religious motivations are not completely neglected by Kulke who states, for example, that when the victorious king had to select for his royal patronage "one or several out of the existing autochthonous cults...[he usually] gave his preference not only according to political opportunism but also to his own individual and dynastic religious tradition. He thus tried to find a cult for his royal patronage which may correspond to both these religious and political intentions." (Kulke 1986: 143). What Schnepel criticizes in Kulke (and others) is rather his disregarding "ritual acts and beliefs as genuine forces and ultimate goals that directly motivate and guide the life of rulers and subjects alike" (Schnepel 1994: 159).

intervention, a man was killed. The case went to the High Court, which confirmed the *rājā*'s exclusive right to worship the god. The decision did not completely put an end to the controversy, and in October 2000 a pamphlet was circulated by another politician, insinuating that the *rājā* was not the real owner of Raghunāth's temple...



**Fig. 2: The raja sitting in his royal palaquin is carried all around the town during Dasherā. (Photo D. Berti)**

Another bone of contention is the *jaleb* procession during Daśahrā. In the *jaleb*, the *rājā* is carried in a palanquin, and makes a circuit of the town to the sound of loud drumming, accompanied by the palanquins of selected village deities. That the *rājā* sits in a palanquin, dressed in royal robes as if he was still a king, is not greatly appreciated by local politicians, and every year this becomes a subject of controversy. This is for instance what a Congress candidate, who was many times MLA in a

local constituency, said about Mahesvar Singh's insistence on performing *jaleb* during Daśahrā in 2004:

"Mahesvar Singh is not a god! This is a democratic country, we do not have *rājās*! Now *rājā* is finished, now *rājā* is public. Now *rājā* should not sit on the shoulders of any human being! He is the last *rājā* who is sitting in a palanquin; the other *rājās* have left this system."

Such accusations are made by those who, for political reasons, are against Maheshvar Singh. The great majority of people, however, although those who may criticize Mahesvar Singh as a person, accept his public ritual role and participate in the "deities' system". This role and this system essentially imply two things: not only is the *rājā* historically entitled to serve Raghunāth, he is also historically bound to the village deities, in relation to whom he is defined as the *mukhyā kārdār*, the supreme administrator.

Before examining what this relationship between the king and the village deities may mean today, I shall analyse the form of the interactions between Mahesvar Singh and village deities, and the "historical" links that established them.

### The *rājā* as the "Fountain of Honours"

In contrast with Raghunāth, whom oral stories present as an outsider brought to Kullu by a seventeenth-century *rājā*, village deities are mostly depicted as "autochthonous" of the region, or at least as being already there before the beginning and the consolidation of the royal dynasty.

These deities, too, are said to rule, but in a very different way than Raghunāth. While the latter never incarnates himself in a human vessel, village gods are believed to express themselves either by speaking through their mediums or by "gesturing" through their wooden palanquins which, carried on the shoulders of devotees, are said to move according to the deity's will. Villagers who are under the jurisdiction of a village deity regularly consult it about individual, social and political problems. Consultation takes the form of a direct, informal and often very passionate dialogue. The *rājā*, as well as other members of the royal family, used to consult village deities either by going to their village or by calling them to the palace, with their mediums and their palanquins. The personal relationships that the *rājā* has with these local deities are very intimate, and both deities and *rājā* are used to communicating, expressing their feelings toward each other, and defending their own points of view<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> A similar kind of interaction between the local deities and the heir has been described for Garhwal by Sax (1991: 178ff).



This intimacy must however be constructed and maintained in a logic of reciprocity: the deity must satisfy the *rājā*'s demands and solve his problems, but the *rājā* must also satisfy a deity's requests – for instance, by offering him a big ceremony or by building a bigger temple to increase its prestige.

This last point needs to be developed. We are talking here of a considerable number of gods and goddesses, each of whom is closely linked to a specific group of villagers – their *hārye* who are often in competition with each other for supremacy. This competition is especially evident during village festivals, when deities and their respective groups of *hārye* meet. During these festivals, conflicts often arise about the superiority of one deity in relation to another. The "prestige issue" – as it is locally called – is particularly relevant at the big annual gathering of village deities at the royal capital, during *Daśahrā*: for the *hārye* this serves as a kind of "barometer" of their deity's supremacy. As Balzani notes more generally for *darbārs* (royal assemblies), they "have always been meaningful to the participants of the rituals as a means of making public and legitimate their relative status and honour vis-à-vis the ruler or leader and other participants. ...The periodic *darbār* gathering served as a forum for revealing changes in status which might, however, be contested by others taking part in the *darbār*" (Balzani 2003: 82)<sup>10</sup>.

As is the case for human dignitaries, the crucial mark of the village deities' respective status and prestige is their closeness to the *rājā*. The more a deity can publicly show this closeness, by receiving honours and attention from the *rājā*, or simply by standing closest to him, the more his prestige is recognized and accepted by everyone<sup>11</sup>. The specific relationship a deity has with the *rājā* is considered to be "historically-based", in the sense that it refers to a particular episode that happened in the past. Some of these episodes may be very similar from one deity to another. For example, it is rare that a deity's repertoire of stories does not include some episodes detailing how he/she helped some *rājā* of the dynasty during a period of drought by providing him with rain, and how

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<sup>10</sup> See Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam (1992), Zins (1995), Cohn (1987), Haynes (1990), Schnepel (1994).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Appadurai and Appadurai Breckenridge (1976); Dirks (1987). The very first criterion met by the festival administration in order to decide on the amount of money (*nazarānā*) assigned to village deities for their trip to the capital is the "old prestige and traditional form of the deity" (*purātana kirti evaṃ pārampārik svarūp*). This criterion is written on the invitation card that the administration sends to each deity participating in the festival.

the *rājā* rewarded the deity in various ways – giving land or honours, or building a temple or a palanquin<sup>12</sup>.

The fact that deities have "historical" relations with the dynasty is constantly put forward by their villagers in order to demonstrate the importance their deity has in the local pantheon. However, in contrast with the story of Raghunāth, known and accepted by everyone, the stories concerning the relationship between a *rājā* and a village deity do not necessarily generate consensus among the different groups of villagers. Moreover, while the reputation of a deity may be widespread in some parts of the valley, the same deity may be completely unknown in another part. Indeed, villagers are eager to have the story of their deity publicly recognised by everyone, published in books, in newspapers or quoted on Internet sites.

Mahesvar Singh is personally concerned with this "prestige issue", since he is still regarded by most of the deities' *hārye* as the one who best knows the royal past. Thus, when there are conflicts about prestige he is consulted by the *hārye*, who ask him to tell them "the entire history of past generations". Mahesvar Singh, too, considers himself as the keeper of what he defines as "contracts" between his ancestors and different village deities that he must respect in order to maintain the dharmic rules.

Whenever he delivers a political speech in a village, for instance, he does not forget to remind the audience of episodes that link him, as *rājā*, to a locality and to its deities – which is not, of course, devoid of political implications. When he was MP for example, and gave a political speech in a village called Banara to persuade villagers to approve the construction of a dam in the area, he said, "With Banara deity we have a relation that cannot be interrupted. Our ancestors have with this deity a relation that cannot be broken. This is a matter of history" (speech held in the village of Banara, 1999).

With some village deities the *rājā* has a particularly close "historical" relationship and a very deep attachment, both of which are constantly enacted during ceremonies. Take for instance the case of Hirmā Devī, a goddess who is considered to be the founder of the dynasty and the "grand-mother" of the *rājā*. The reference to this foundation, and to how she helped the *rājā* to get rid of his enemies, especially a certain Piti Thakur, is regularly evoked by the deity herself through her medium

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<sup>12</sup> The need for alliances with deities seems to have been a crucial element in the exercise of political power in all Himalayan kingdoms. By analysing documents from the Kathmandu Valley, in Nepal, Burghart (1987) has shown how royal gifts of land to gods was one way for kings to establish personal alliances with them in order to obtain victory for themselves and prosperity for the kingdom.

when consulted by Mahesvar Singh: "There was the *rājā* Bamani . . . there was Piti Thakur in Jai Dhar, I have won, I have turned him away ... I gave you the kingdom!"

Indeed, Mahesvar Singh considers this goddess as his *dādī* (grandmother). He explains that *Hirmā* is the local name for *Hiḍimba*, the *Rakshasi* who, in the *Mahābhārata*, married *Bhima*, one of the five *Pāṇḍava* brothers, the heroes of the epic. As he once told me "we (the Kullu dynasty) are from the *Pāṇḍava* family and *Hiḍimba* had married into our family! For this we call her *dādī*".

This idea is also expressed in ordinary interactions. For instance, once I saw the *rājā*'s son and his daughter meet the medium of *Hirmā devī* – a tall and corpulent man, ill-shaven, belonging to a low caste – and say, while addressing his daughter, "Come here, baby! Come to say 'Hallo' to your grandmother!"



**Fig. 3: The Raja's son starts to run violently while carrying Hadimba's palanquin. (Photo: D. Berti)**

Close relations between the goddess *Hirmā-Hiḍimba* and the royal family are regularly maintained. During the goddess's annual festival, Mahesvar Singh goes to her temple, 40 km away from his palace, and cuts

(or has the priest cut on his behalf) off the head of a buffalo that is sacrificed for that occasion. At that moment, the *rājā* also starts to tremble, showing that he is temporarily possessed by the goddess. The goddess' medium, on his side, risks losing his control in the *rājā*'s sight, and whenever he is close to the *rājā* he ties around his head a black cloth in order to diminish the force by which the goddess manifests herself through him. Even with this precaution, the divine manifestation is so violent that the medium has to be held by other men so that he may not run away or harm anyone. The *rājā*'s son, too, is powerfully linked to the goddess. Whenever he takes her palanquin on his shoulders, he starts to run violently in all directions, driven by the power of the goddess.

Many other village deities have a privileged relationship with the royal family, regularly confirmed and celebrated at ritual level. At any time, one of these village deities can receive a letter or a messenger from Mahesvar Singh who invites him/her to the palace for a consultation with palanquin, medium or both. In the same way, the *rājā* may decide to go to a village to visit his deity. These relationships exemplify, as well as maintain, a wide network involving the *rājā*, the multiplicity of deities and their *hārye*. However, although practically every village deity is linked to the dynasty through oral stories, all these stories do not always correspond to an effective, contemporary ritual relationship. In this sense, Mahesvar Singh may indeed be considered responsible for the "past contracts", since he can decide to confirm them or not in a ritual manner.

Moreover, not only does he continue to recognise some ancient links, he regularly creates new ones as well, with deities whom he personally prefers. And even today, the care he shows for a village deity is a source of prestige for this deity. For instance, he is strongly linked with Pañcālī, a goddess who, since recently, was not supposed to have any "historical" links with the royal family. From an administrative point of view, Pañcālī is included in the category of *nai devtā* (new deities). New deities are locally opposed to *muāfīdar* deities, who got *muāfī* (exemption from taxation) from previous kings.<sup>13</sup> However, Pañcālī nowadays happens to be Mahesvar Singh's favourite goddess, for she is said to have helped him and his brother many times to win elections. As a consequence, Mahesvar Singh shows a special predilection for this goddess: many times he has called her (the palanquin or/and her medium) to his palace, or gone to her village temple, almost forty kilometres from the capital. An inhabitant of Pañcālī's village told me, for instance, what happened in 1998, when the *rājā* stood as candidate in central elections:

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<sup>13</sup> *Muāfīdar* deities and *nai* deities appear in two separate lists in the official records which indicate the amount they receive from the Dushera Committee for their participation to the festival. Panchali is always included in a list of the *nai devta*.

The *rājā*'s party [the BJP] was not in power at that time and the goddess [consulted by the *rājā* through her medium] said, "If you come here with your heart, I will change the kingdom of Delhi". Six months later, in 1998, the government of Delhi changed [the BJP came to power], and the *rājā* got elected as MP! In order to thank the goddess the *rājā* held a big ceremony for her at her village.

These political-ritual links between *rājā* and village deities are in some ways similar to those in the past. In the same way that Hirmā is supposed to have given the kingdom to the first *rājā*, Pañcālī nowadays helps Mahesvar Singh to win elections. Indeed, this similarity of roles was expressed by the goddess herself who, speaking through her medium, said during a consultation, "Oh Mahārāja! I have sent you to Delhi as a Member of Parliament!"

This goddess was quite unknown until recently. Being constantly consulted by the *rājā* and tenderly treated by him during Daśahrā, she has now achieved notoriety. In the course of the past few years, these links have come to be "historically" legitimated. According to a version which is more and more often repeated by the *hārye* of Pañcālī (and first of all by her medium), this goddess was the lineage goddess of the *rājā* of Shangri, a branch of the Kullu lineage. Since the *rājā* of Shangri died without leaving any heir, Pañcālī now claims, through her medium, to be the lineage goddess of the Kullu branch. Mahesvar Singh adds to this story the fact that Pañcālī is one of the names of Draupadī who was, in the *Mahābhārata*, the wife of the Pāṇḍavas, from whom the *rājā* – as we have seen in the case of the story of Hirmā-Hiḍimba – claims to be descended.

Such efforts to transform contemporary history into a history that can produce tradition and honours are however not accepted by everyone in the region. For many, the present alliance between Pañcālī and the *rājā* is nothing but mere electoral strategy, and the honours or attentions that the goddess receives today have nothing to do with the festival nor with "tradition". For example, the story of the ascension of the goddess Pañcālī in terms of prestige has been commented on by the medium of one of the "traditional" lineage goddesses of the royal family. Somewhat annoyed by Pañcālī's success with Mahesvar Singh, he said:

Pañcālī is a new goddess; she was not there before. They found her statue only recently. The region where they found it is a BJP region and Pañcālī is also a BJP goddess. This means that if Pañcālī becomes powerful, the *rājā* also will, and that the BJP will get more votes. If he honours Pañcālī, he will get the votes.

The medium distinguished between these profitable but self-interested relations and those based on sincere devotion and reciprocal respect, which bound the royal family to "old" goddesses such as hers:

The *rājā* and the royal family believe first of all in the "*muāfīdar*" goddesses, it is the whole royal family who believes in them, this is a matter of tradition (*paramparā*).

Until now, these opinions have been shared by most of the mediums of the ancient goddesses, who look at the increased importance of the "new gods" with condescension, if not hostility/envy. But if Pañcālī's story does become more credible, the goddess will eventually become another "traditional" lineage goddess of the Kullu royal family.

### The "chief administrator"

We have seen that the *rājā* is considered to be the "*mukhyā kārdār*" (chief administrator) of the village deities. These days, this role is more metaphorical than literal, since for any juridical or economic problems concerning the management of temples, their *kārdārs* go to the District Commissioner and not to the *rājā*<sup>14</sup>. But there are important ritual consequences for the *rājā*; for example the fact that he has – as Bhoj Chand Thakur, a local lawyer, explained to me – "the prime right of holding an audience": he can call these deities whenever and wherever he wants, in order to consult them.

This right is directly associated by the people with his role as Raghunāth's *charībardar*: "The *rājā* is the chief of the gods and goddesses; he is called chief *kārdār* because Raghunāth is the main deity, before whom all village deities must bow". Moreover, oral stories underline the violent and compulsory power that the *rājā* had over the deities' mediums – or, in an ambiguous way, over the deities. Many stories tell how the *rājā* could also exercise "pressure" on village gods and on the powers (*śakti*) they have over rain or sunshine within their territories. It is said for instance that in time of drought, he used to organize a "universal consultation" (*jāgtī pūch*) by ordering all deities' mediums to come to his palace and by asking all the deities to provide rain – if rain did not fall at once, he threatened to have their heads cut off.<sup>15</sup>

Emerson, a British administrator who governed the region of Shimla shortly after the assumption of ultimate authority by the East India Company, was asked by some villagers to punish the mediums of a very famous god of the region, Kamru Nāg, considered to be responsible for withholding rain. Usually, the measures to be taken in such circumstances were decided by the *rājā* or, in his absence, by one of his representatives.

<sup>14</sup> Many village deities still have some land in their name and this land is managed by the administrator. Most of the problems that require the intervention of the District Commissioner concern the management of this land.

<sup>15</sup> See also Vidal (1988: 23).

When the region came under British control, the Administrator occasionally had to assume the royal role.

It was clearly up to me to do something, and as all arguments failed to convince the people, I finally gave orders to the Wazir [minister of a territory] to call the erring diviners, and without ill-treating them in any way to attempt to bring them to a sense of their duties. The peasants were more or less content with this show of activity, but the results were not satisfactory, and when a few weeks later, the diviners themselves appeared before me, I took the opportunity of reminding them of their duties, and the punishments prescribed for their neglect. They were refreshingly candid. Kamru Nāg's job, they admitted, was to send sunshine and rain in their proper season. If he failed to do so, they (the diviners) were called to the police station and kept confined. If the rain did not then come within a reasonable time, they were made to stand naked in the sun; or if fine weather was needed and rain fell, they were made to stand up to their waists in the river until the sun shone. They knew of no reason why the same measures should not now be taken, but they would like four days of grace, and if no rain came within that time, they would bow to whatever punishment was ordered. So they were given their four days, and as rain fell before they ended, no further action was necessary. (Emerson, manuscript: 62).

The practice of *jāgtī pūch* is maintained by Mahesvar Singh even today. In August 1999 he even decided to renovate the temple of Jagti Patt in Nagar, where consultations are supposed to have been held in ancient times. At the entrance of the temple a sign in English explains the origin of the place to the visitors:

"Even now during the great hour of natural calamities and other miseries and in order to decide matters of importance with regard to gods and goddesses, all the representatives of god and goddess, gur, pujar etc. carrying the insignia of their devi [...] assemble at this holy place. Head of the Kullu raj family with the order of devi-devta organize the function with traditional reverence. [...] all the gurs [deities' mediums] who are present on the occasion express the views of their devtas after going into trans (sic) and this becomes a base on which to organise havan-yaghya-path [Brahmanical rituals] for the welfare of the people. (Signed) Mahesvar Singh Administrator of Jagti patt temple, Naggar."

What is called *jāgtī pūch* today is far from including "all" village gods and goddesses. The number of deities invited is always limited and depends on the problem to be solved. In these consultations, the *rājā* places the deities' mediums according to their respective caste or to their importance. One specific deity, Pañc Bīr, has to open and close the consultation. In the opening phase, Pañc Bīr evokes, more or less explicitly, the problem that is to be discussed and then, when all the deities have been consulted, he gives the summary and the conclusion.

The *rājā* organized a consultation in October 2001 during the Daśahrā festival. This consultation was requested by the goddess Pañcālī, who

urged the *rājā* to solve a conflict between two groups of villagers competing for an honorific position to be assigned to the palanquins of their respective deities (Berti, forthcoming). One village accused the *rājā* of favouring the other deity only because its jurisdiction was in a constituency where the *rājā*'s brother was competing for elections. By contrast, their own deity was in a reserved constituency from where the *rājā*'s brother could not get any votes. The *rājā* had started to consult the administrators of the two competing gods to try to put an end to the dispute but the gods, speaking through their mediums, wanted the problem to be solved by the deities themselves and asked the *rājā* to organize a *jāgtī pūch*.



**Fig. 4: The raja consults the mediums of two village goddesses.  
(Photo D. Berti)**

One god: O Badani<sup>16</sup>! It is your quarrel, not ours. What should not happen has happened. You have to proceed with the *jāgtī pūch*. O Badani: our soul is on the mountain! We will make the decision ourselves!

Mahesvar Singh: Maharaja! Now, what can I do? Today men want to be greater

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<sup>16</sup> Village deities call the king "Badani", the name of the royal dynasty from whom kings claim to descend, and the king addresses deities by calling them "Maharaja".



than gods. We are doing as our ancestors did, but if you fight each other what we will do?

Other god: O Badani! You have to keep politics (*rājñīti*) out of religion (*dharma*)! There should be no disparity in our work! You did wrong, you have to organise the *jāgtī pūch*!

King: You know, Maharaja, we kept politics away from religion. You know eternal things. If we did wrong you have to inflict punishment on us ...I'm following the traditions as told by our ancestors, but still [you think that] I did something wrong and you punish me. The *jāgtī pūch* cannot be set up so quickly! I will do it after Daśahrā at the place you indicate. Nobody is greater than you!

At the end of this very direct and informal interaction the *rājā* started trembling as a sign of being temporarily possessed by deities. When the trembling finished, he seemed to be very moved and tears poured from his eyes.

The attitude that the *rājā* has today vis-à-vis village deities must be understood in relation to the contemporary political context. As a politician, Mahesvar Singh requires strong support from village deities, since whatever they will publicly say through their medium or their palanquin may have an impact on their *harye*'s electoral choice. As a *rājā* and a politician, Mahesvar Singh is also most concerned with a "public scandal", especially during the Daśahrā festival, when journalists and cameramen are on the look out for a good scoop for the day, the slightest misunderstanding between him and the deities' *harye* makes the front pages of the local newspapers.

### **The bureaucratisation of gods' decision-making**

The political context of democracy in which Mahesvar Singh is interacting with village deities makes it difficult to maintain the control that he is supposed to have had in the past over the deities' worship.

In another nearby kingdom, that of Mandi (see Conzelmann, this volume), we know from Emerson's work (1920) that in the pre-colonial and colonial period the *rājā* controlled village rituals by interfering in the nomination of temple administrators and gods' mediums, as well as in the construction of gods' palanquins.

"[...] a new festival cannot be instituted without his [*rājā*'s] permission, nor a god, who has previously been without a *rath* or litter, be given one without special sanction. A few years ago, the subjects of a village deity wished to change the shape of his idol, from the pyramidal form, popular in some parts of the State, to the form with a large circular canopy favoured by his immediate neighbours; but before they could do so, they had to obtain the *rājā*'s approval.

Ordinarily, the *rājā* does not interfere in the appointment of the god's diviner, but his right to do so is recognised, and for the more important gods it is exercised. This is especially the case where the office of diviner is hereditary in a number of families and changes are accordingly numerous. Each change of office has to be reported for his sanction. Similarly, when the office is hereditary and the family dies out the *rājā*'s orders must be obtained regarding the selection of a household from which future candidates are to be taken." (Emerson 1920: 68).

It would be impossible today for Mahesvar Singh to maintain all these prerogatives. Villagers, and especially deities' *hārye*, though they recognize the ritual role of the *rājā*, are very conscious of their democratic rights and know every rule related to the management of the deity's worship. In particular, Mahesvar Singh has no way of interfering in the selection of deities' mediums (what Emerson calls "diviners") – neither as a *rājā* nor as a politician. The very specificity of the mediums' role – to serve as a god's mouthpiece – makes it less easy to control them through political pressure. Most of the mediums, moreover, come from low-caste or rural families and are not used to the official, urban and bureaucratic maze of state power.

Moreover, it should be noted that, at least in the contemporary period, what a god says through his medium is rarely unanimously accepted, and can at any time be contradicted either by another deity or by another "vessel" of the same deity. For instance, in the case where a god has two mediums of different castes<sup>17</sup>, it may happen that what is said by the high-caste medium is contradicted by what is said by his low caste one<sup>18</sup>. What a deity says through his medium may also be contradicted by what he says through his palanquin<sup>19</sup>. Here we are indeed in a ritual context where

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<sup>17</sup>In the cases I have observed, the hereditary character of the office of a medium seems less important now than what Emerson reports for his time, and many deities who before had a high-caste lineage of mediums now have mediums from low caste or, in some cases, they have one from a high caste and one from a low caste.

<sup>18</sup>For Garhwal, see Sax (1991).

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Vidal (1987), Berti (2001). The presence of doubt as such explains why the mediums' answers are always submitted to a number of ritual techniques, which serve as tests of truth for those who are consulting. One of these techniques, for instance, is *ole pogle* : the person lays three stones in front of the medium and associates each stone with a reply; if the medium chooses the stone corresponding to the reply previously given, this will prove that it was the deity who had spoken and not the medium. Another kind of verification is to ask the palanquin to confirm what the deity has said through his medium, or the contrary. The "relation of power" between the medium and the palanquin varies from place to place and depends on the authority a medium has among the *hārye*. An important factor is the presence of factions among the *hārye* (Berti 2001).

doubt is never absent. Even the people who are most completely implicated in the "deity's system" never exclude the possibility that a medium or those who carry the palanquin interfere in the god's decision and impose their own view – either by speaking on their own or by directing the movements of the deity's palanquin. The doubt that is cast on the veracity of the deities' verdict, although present in any ordinary consultation, takes on huge dimensions in collective consultations organized by the *rājā* since Mahesvar Singh, both as a *rājā* and as a politician, is the target of different accusations. All these factors make the position taken by gods' mediums, when consulted by Mahesvar Singh, hard to predict and to control.

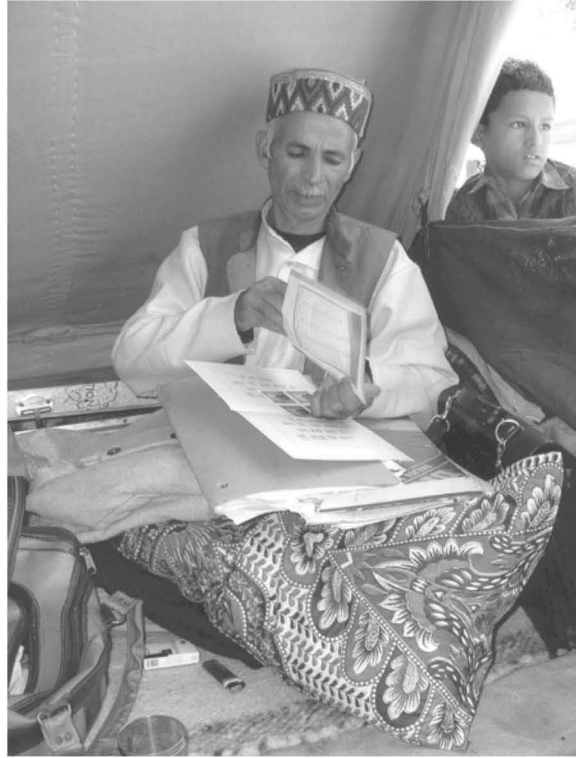
Another, more diplomatic way for the *rājā* to interact with deities and gain the approval of their supporters is to solicit the mediation of what is called the *kārdār sangh*, the association of gods' administrators. A *kārdār* is officially responsible for the deity's land property. Since the British period, in fact, a legal precedent grants to the Indian deities the right to possess, in their own capacity, material property. The deity was considered as being "underaged" and the *kārdār* was his "tutor". This role of "tutor" is sometimes perceived quite literally, as shown by Norottam, a *kārdār* who, when he understood that his deity had got less money for Daśahrā than another neighbouring deity, said, "I will write to the District Commissioner and I will bring my son [my deity] to first position [by getting more money] so that other deities will regard him with respect".

The *kārdār sangh* was created in 1984 with the official aim of having a representative body of deities' administrators who might be able to defend "deities' interests" during official meetings held by the administration of the Daśahrā festival – for example, of providing electricity in their tents for the duration of Daśahrā in order to guarantee the deities' security<sup>20</sup>. Twenty years after its creation, the organization has become very powerful in Kullu, and has "bureaucratized" the management of deities' affairs: everything is verbalized, submitted to a vote and discussed, making use of official orders and judicial argumentation. In this decision-making process, deities' *harye* interact not only with the *rājā* but also with the District Commissioner, with local ministers or with other state representatives. This is especially evident during the Daśahrā festival when public funds are distributed by the Daśahrā committee among village deities, by giving them to the *kārdār* – who, for this reason, have even recently been provided with official identity cards.

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<sup>20</sup> During this festival deities' palanquins stay in temporary tents provided by the festival administration. Without any electricity, their devotees immediately start to get anxious about the masks or jewellery that might be stolen.

The official relationships of the *kārdār sangh*'s members to the state administration regarding the practical and juridical matters of the deities' management overlap occasionally with the ritual relationship they have to the *rājā*. This is due to the fact that whenever Mahesvar Singh is in power as a politician, he is also the president of the Daśahrā committee and the distinction between his ritual role of Raghunāth's representative, and his official role as state representative, tends to merge with each other.



**Fig. 5: The kardar Narottam checking the god's papers.  
(Photo D. Berti)**

Many people – including some *kārdārs* – explicitly denounce the *kārdār sangh* as completely dominated by "*rājā*'s men" who would be under the *rājā*'s pressure. Such was, for example, the reaction of a god's *haria* when he realized that all the *rājā*'s efforts to solve a "prestige conflict" between different groups of villagers during Daśahrā were going through the

medium mobilization of the *kārdār sangh*, without asking the deities by consulting their mediums.

"This *kārdār sangh* is a *rājā* creation and its members only follow the orders of the *rājā* ... But gods' decision cannot be taken by vote! This is a dictatorship!... You know, elections of panchayat village councils are coming up and the *rājā* wants to favour those who will give him more votes. This is the point!"

From the point of view of the *kārdār sangh*'s members, they consider themselves better than the mediums at representing their deities' positions in public decision-making. For example, at the end of a *jāgtī pūch* when Mahesvar Singh, at the request of the deities themselves, was expecting deities to take position in a conflict implicating two groups of deities' *harye*, the *kārdār* Norottam said this to me:

"In past times, when there were natural calamities like rain, fire and drought, the deities used to give some direct explanations. But today this does not happen. We *kārdārs* have to do it instead. Like in *jāgtī pūch* on the last day, they [deities' mediums] were all speaking about clouds and sunshine and none gave the solution for those two deities."

What the mobilization of the *kārdār sangh*'s members suggests – through the formal and democratic character of their meetings, the importance given to written documents and articles of law – is that they want to affirm the importance of their role in the decision-making process, and to present their procedures as more eloquent, more verifiable and more effective than those followed during the consultation of deities' mediums.

### Conclusion

In the kingdom of Kullu, religion and politics were in the past strictly intermingled. The kingdom was officially ruled by a sovereign god to whom subordinate gods – who were themselves considered as kings at their village level – paid a tribute and showed their respect annually. In the same perspective, the ritual links that a king had with village deities were often presented as a consequence of episodes having a political dimension. The case of the goddess Hirmā/Hiḍimba whose story tells how she became ritually linked with the royal dynasty after having given the kingdom to the first raja is representative of the same kind of intermingling. This observation corresponds to what has been observed in other regional contexts (Burghart 1987, Dirks 1987).

By contrast, in the modern kingship which can be observed today in Kullu, two separate domains – of religion and (electoral) politics – are constantly distinguished by people even though, in practical, they

constantly overlap. This is shown, for example, by the case of the Congress politician Lal Chand Prarthi who, while deploring that the king persists in playing a role that no more exists in a democratic system, had its own ambition, to put the cult of Raghunath under the government's control. Another example of this overlapping is the attitude that gods' mediums have vis-à-vis the political role of the king. While speaking on behalf of their respective gods, they may indeed, from one hand, promote the king's political career in Delhi's Parliament (as in the case of Pañcālī) and, at the same time, accuse him of interfering with politics in religion sphere (as it happens during the *jāgtī pūch*).

In this context, Mahesvar Singh appears to be faced with a delicate task. On one hand, he has to observe and respect what are perceived to be traditional relations between his ancestors and local deities, thus maintaining his ritual role of protector of *dharma*; on the other hand, he has to create new links with his favourite deities without being immediately suspected of pursuing a political calculation.

What appears to characterise the current relationship between the king and the village gods in Kullu is, moreover, the recent creation of the *kārdār sangh*. We are indeed witnessing a bureaucratisation and in some ways, a "rationalisation" of the gods' decision-makings, with the king giving more credence to what the *kārdār* decides by official meetings or democratic votes, than to what the gods themselves pronounce through their human mediums.

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