

Fighting enemies and protecting territory: deities as local rulers in Kullu, Himachal Pradesh

Brigitte Luchesi

The Kullu region in the northern Indian State of Himachal Pradesh is known for its numerous local deities, most of whom are housed in temples situated within or near villages. The inhabitants of these villages hold their local deities in high esteem, offering them regular worship and calling on them in private as well as communal matters. When taken out of the temples in the form of their movable images, they are also approached with great respect. During these occasions they are displayed as divine rulers served by a devoted entourage.

I will focus on three deities and will try to point out features which characterise them as rulers. First I will look at Lord Raghunāth, the state deity of the former Kullu *rājās*, and his public appearance during the annual Daśahrā festival. In the second part I will turn towards two village deities – Haḍimbā Devī of Dhungri and Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi of Vashisht village – and describe recent events that, to my mind, extend our understanding of "rituals of divine kingship".¹ Finally I will try to compare the various activities of these three deities, naming a few similarities and differences.

Lord Raghunāth, divine sovereign of Kullu

The deity Raghunāth, or "Raghunāthjī" as he is respectfully called by his devotees, is the presiding deity of the famous Kullu Daśahrā, celebrated annually in the capital of Kullu District, formerly known as Sultanpur but now also called Kullu. The name Raghunāth ("Lord of the Raghus") is unmistakably that of the Vaiṣṇava deity Rāma. Raghunāthjī's temple is situated near the palace of the former *rājās* of Kullu in Kullu-Sultanpur. At the beginning of the Daśahrā festival his central cult image, a movable one, is brought to the fair ground (*maidān*) in Kullu-Dhalpur, along with the image of his consort Sītā. A special tent is put up for him to serve as a temporary residence and temple. Here, in the midst of a busy fair (*melā*), which for many people is the main attraction of the Kullu Daśahrā, he is

¹ Most of the following descriptions are based on observations made during a number of visits to the Kullu area since 1982. Pioneering studies on divine kingship in the Western Himalayas are those by Galey (1989); Sax (2002), and Sutherland (2003).



Fig. 1: The image of Lord Raghunath on a silver throne. Priests prepare the temporal abode of their deity for the great reception of the local gods on *darbar* day. (Photo: B. Luchesi)

regularly worshipped (*pūjā*) by his priests. During the opening hours he may be visited by whoever wants to benefit from his auspicious sight (*darśan*). Special respect is paid to him by the numerous village gods and goddesses (*devtās* and *devīs*) arriving from all over the district.² The *devtās* and *devīs* travel in the form of their mobile images which in this part of India consist of a number of *mohre* fixed to a wooden structure called a *rath*. *Mohre* (sg. *mohrā*) are mask-like metal faces, several of which normally represent an individual deity.³ Sometimes two or even three deities are considered to be present on a single *rath*. Most often these *raths* can be carried like palanquins on the shoulders of two or more men. It is believed that the movements of the *rath* are produced by the deity in question and that they communicate his or her mood along with other information. *Devtās/devīs* also gather at other times and places, but the Kullu Daśahrā is the largest gathering of all.

The origin of Kullu Daśahrā is said to date back to the 17th century when Vaiṣṇavism was introduced to this region by the *rājās* of Kullu, a process which parallels those in neighbouring *rājā*-doms (Nurpur, Kangra, Chamba, Sirmaur, Mandi⁴). According to the royal chronicles *Rājā Jagat Singh*, who ruled from 1637-1662, had caused the death of a Brahmin, whereupon a curse in the form of leprosy fell upon him. On the advice of his Pandits and hoping to remove the curse, he sent a Brahmin to Ayodhya who stole a famous idol of Rāma. It is said to be the one still used for worship in Raghunāth's temple. The *Rājā* had it installed and put on the royal throne.⁵ He proclaimed himself to be merely the viceroy and consequently was healed.

From this time till its fall this remained in theory the constitution of the principality. There was no distinction between the royal treasury and that of the temple of Ragnath, and the Rajas, on the great festival days, took the front place among the priests and attendants (*Gazetteer of the Kangra District 1897: 21*).

During *Rājā Jagat Singh's* rule a quite considerable amount of land was assigned to temples all over the Kullu region and to the families in charge of them. The deities of these temples along with their entourages were expected to take part in the annual Daśahrā celebrations started by Jagat

² In 1995 119 local deities were counted (Vashishtha n. d.: 11-17). Harcourt (1972 [1871]: 95) reported 70 to 80 *devtās* and *devīs* in the 1860s.

³ See the photos and descriptions of various *raths* in Postel e.a. (1985).

⁴ For Mandi compare with Conzelmann in this volume.

⁵ Cf. Hutchison and Vogel (1994 [1933]: 458-80); Rose (1980 [1919]: 474); Shabab (1996: 73-75).

Singh and held in the capital, the present city of Kullu, where the palace of the Rajput rulers and Lord Raghunāth's temple were situated.

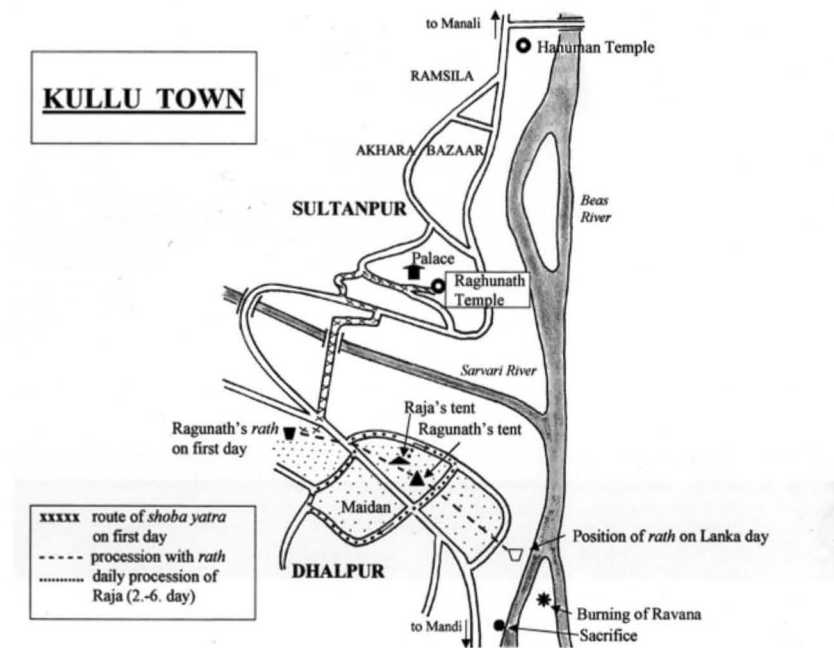


Fig. 2: Map of Kullu town showing the processional routes during the Dasahra days. B. Luchesi.

The royal chronicles present the relationship between human sovereign and deity as one in which Lord Raghunāth was the true ruler whereas the *rājā* was understood as his prime minister (*divān*) or *kārdār* (manager), i.e. as his "first servant". In accordance with this concept they ruled together, the deity being a divine king whose power was exercised by the human ruler. The rights of the Rajput *rājās* (later on *rāos*) of Kullu were severely restricted by the British during the 19th century and were officially ended in 1947 when the current ruler renounced his throne. But the extinction of Hindu kingdoms in contemporary India has not, as Fuller (1992: 107) has pointed out, brought to an end the royal status of the former state deities nor has it eradicated the idea of divine kingship as an

ideal state model. Kullu seems to be another case in point. In particular, the Kullu Daśahrā continues to provide a stage for the enactment of rituals of divine kingship. Lord Raghunāth and the *rājā* are focal points of various rituals that structure the Daśahrā period. The late Mohinder Singh, the last official *rājā*, who was held in high esteem by many Kulluans, continued to perform the traditional part until his death in 1989, after which his eldest son Tikka Maheshwar Singh, still referred to as "Rājā Sāhab" by many, took over the ritual duties. In the following I will sketch those ritual activities that constitute the most telling examples of the ongoing efficacy of the concept of royal divinity in the context of the Kullu Daśahrā.

The Daśahrā festival in Kullu starts on the tenth (*dasvāmī*) day of the bright half of Āśvin. This is the auspicious day associated with the defeat of Rāvaṇa, the demon king of Lanka, by the divine king Rāma as told in the great Rāmāyaṇa epic, and celebrated in various ways throughout India. In contrast to other regions, however, in Kullu Rāma's meritorious act of slaying his enemy is not celebrated on the tenth day itself, but on the festival's closing day a week later. During the days of the festival, Raghunāth is publicly presented as the divine king Rāma. Unlike the daily rituals in his temple when he is worshipped as a king residing peacefully in his palace, during the Daśahrā days he is shown as a supreme commander and king prepared for war, i.e. as Lord Rāma out in the battlefield. He is accompanied by the *rājā* and by village deities from all over the Kullu region. At certain points the spectators, too, actively participate in the dramatic sequences.

Most of the village *devtās* and *devīs* arrive on the first day of the festival. Accompanied by their mediums (*gur*), priests, managers, musicians and other people from the villages to which they belong, many of them are first of all carried up to Raghunāth's temple in Sultanpur to greet the presiding deity and visit the *rājā* in the neighbouring palace. The deity most eagerly expected is Goddess Haḍimbā from Dhungrī near Manali in the northern part of the Kullu District.⁶ She is one of the five *kul devīs* (lineage goddesses) of the *rājā*'s family and it is said that the festival cannot start without her. Upon her arrival she is carried to the inner door of the palace from where she calls the *rājā* and asks him to come out and accompany Raghunāthjī to the military camp, i.e. to get ready for the great battle. This act may also be interpreted as infusing the *rājā* with special martial power comparable to the *mīr* of a *jaḡa* described by Zoller (1993: 233).

By the time Goddess Haḍimbā arrives, the *rājā* has already performed several *pūjās*: he has worshipped Lord Raghunāth in his temple, along with

⁶ See also Berti in this volume.

the royal weapons, the great war drum, Raghunāth's horse⁷ and the various emblems of the deity. Dressed in traditional royal attire and adorned with turban and jewels he joins the god in his temple whereupon everybody gets ready for the *śobā yātrā*, the "splendid procession" with Lord Raghunāth. The god's horse walks in front, followed by drums, trumpets, men carrying banners and the silver sceptre of Raghunāthjī; then comes the *rājā* accompanied by kinsmen and dignitaries, some with royal weapons including the *rājā*'s sword (*talvār*). Immediately after them march temple priests who carry the precious image of Raghunāth on a small palanquin, one of them holding Raghunāth's sword; they are followed by men with the silver throne, the processional umbrella and insignia of the god and finally a number of village deities on their *raths*. The procession moves down the narrow lanes of Sultanpur lined with devoted citizens, crosses the Sarvari River, walks up through Dhalpur bazaar and finally reaches the upper part of the *maidān*, where a large crowd has gathered to receive the procession and watch the god being transferred onto a huge wooden processional cart, also called a *rath*. The accompanying *devtās* take their places to the right, left, and behind this special vehicle, which is only used during Daśahrā. Seeing it in use is one of the highlights of the festival for many Kulluans. The atmosphere is both joyful and intense. Suddenly people seize the long ropes fixed to the cart and start pulling it. Accompanied by enthusiastic cries and the sound of drums and trumpets, the *rath* is manoeuvred to the middle of the *melā* ground where Raghunāth's tent has been put up in preparation for his stay through the Daśahrā festival.

During this period, Raghunāthjī is visited by both human devotees and village deities. Most of these *devtās* and *devīs* will also camp on the *maidān*; fixed seats around the grounds are allotted to them for the duration of their stay. During these visiting hours the image of Raghunāth is seated on the silver throne, lavishly dressed and richly decorated with jewels and flowers, sceptre and other royal insignia placed next to him.⁸

Not far from Raghunāth's tent is a second one designed as an audience hall for the *rājā* where he in turn receives the divine visitors and their human companions. Every day at sunset he goes on a clockwise tour through the camp and visits the assembled *devtās* and *devīs*. Raghunāth's horse is led in front of him. A special event is scheduled for the sixth day called "*darbār*", i.e. reception day, when all the gods come to visit Lord

⁷ This horse is also referred to as the horse of Narasiṅha, locally called Narsingh, the fierce *avatāra* of Viṣṇu (cf. the photo opp. p. 118 in Chetwode 1984).

⁸ The idol of Sītā, Raghunāth's consort, is normally not visible as it is placed underneath Raghunāth's coat. It can be seen during the morning services when it is bathed and dressed.

Raghunāth and then the *rājā*. The climax is reached on the seventh day, known as "Lankā". Raghunāth is again seated in the large wooden cart and – this time without Sītā – pulled down to the southern part of the *maidān* near the Beas River where a large crowd has gathered. He is accompanied by the *rājā* and several village deities. While the *rājā* walks down the river bank, Raghunāth and his priests remain on his vehicle; the *devtās* and *devīs* on their palanquins are positioned to his right and left. From here they overlook the river bed and watch the fire being lit on a small island symbolising the destruction of Lankā and the death of the demon king Rāvaṇa. Not visible from the point where Raghunāth's cart is waiting but to all who managed to climb down the steep embankment is the slaughtering of a buffalo as a sacrifice to Goddess Haḍimbā in the presence of the *rājā*.⁹ The "burning of Lankā" and the subsequent arrival of Sītā in a small palanquin are greeted with exclamations of joy by the onlookers. Many of them eagerly join those who start pulling the wooden *rath* back north. Having reached the northern end of the *maidān* the images of Raghunāth and Sītā are transferred to their small palanquin again and ceremoniously transported back to their permanent temple in Sultanpur. The village deities, too, prepare for their journey home.

Viewing the event in its entirety, it is clear that the Daśahrā festival was and still is an outstanding occasion to underline and recreate the royal powers and authority of the deity Raghunāth of Kullu. Of course he is regarded and treated as a divine king throughout the whole year, especially by his priests, whose daily temple services and attendances display features of the etiquette of the former worldly courts.¹⁰ During the Daśahrā festival, however, he can be met and seen *outside* his usual residence engaged in familiar royal *activities*: supreme warrior publicly fighting for the just and good cause against evil forces, defender of his kingdom as part of the order of the universe, restorer and protector of *dharma*. The military events are realistically enacted: the image of Raghunāthjī is brought from his temple in the centre to a place outside the old city boundaries which bears all the signs of a military camp with tents and temporal arrangements. The village deities, most of them

⁹ Interestingly the location of this island southeast of the southernmost part of the *maidān* corresponds to the geographical situation of Sri Lanka which often is identified with the Lankā of the Rāmāyaṇa. The buffalo used to belong to the eightfold sacrifice (*aṣṭanbali*) traditionally given to Haḍimbā Devī by the *rājā* on this occasion. It seems that it is the only one of the eight *balis* actually given nowadays. Having received this sacrifice the goddess and her entourage immediately leave the scene and start walking home. This is frequently taken as a sign that the festival is over.

¹⁰ See e.g. Fuller 1992: 68-9.

positioned behind Lord Raghunāth or to his left, literally "back up" the leader. He is identified with Lord Rāma who is, as everybody present knows, the epitome of a divine king.

What, then, is the role of the *rājā*? He, too, is on public display throughout the festival, playing the traditional part of the worldly ruler. He publicly acts as the "first worshipper" of Lord Raghunāth performing *pūjās* in the temporary tent temple and regularly seeking auspicious sight, *darśan*. They can be seen acting together, either jointly as in the *śobā yātrā*, the Lankā events and in the daily rounds through the camp or in a temporal sequence as in the *darbār* receptions on the sixth day. Their close relationship is also visible through the spatial vicinity of their tents. As mentioned at the beginning, the former *rājās* have lost their worldly power. During the Daśahrā rituals, however, their descendants are still treated with considerable respect by the groups of visiting local people who accompany the village *devtās*. This may be an expression of the notion still prevalent that the human part of the unity of state deity and king participates in the god's divinity – at least for the duration of the rituals. However, this does not necessarily mean that political or economic power is bestowed on him.

Two village deities from the northern Kullu region

Haḍimbā Devī

The goddess Haḍimbā, also known Harimbā, Hiḍimbā or Hirmā, has been mentioned already in connection with the Daśahrā festival in Kullu town.¹¹ She is one of the five *kul devīs* of the former rulers and their descendants;¹² all five may be called "royally patronised local goddesses" (Schnepel 1995: 14). In addition she is considered to be the one who chose the rulers of Kullu, which earned her the title of *dādī* (paternal grandmother) of the Kullu *rājās*. 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. Historical proof exists that in 1553 *Rājā* Bahadur Singh Badani had a temple erected for her in the forest between Dhungri village and Manalghar, today known as Old Manali.¹³

All this characterises Haḍimbā as a goddess whose significance goes far beyond her immediate domain. In the present context, however, I wish to

¹¹ On Haḍimbā Devī see Diserens (1993-94, 1995-96); Jettmar-Thakur (1984b); Luchesi 2002; Thakur 1997: 61.

¹² The others are: Tripurasundarī and Batantī, both from Naggar, Sarvarī from Shuru, Docā-Mucā from Gajan.

¹³ For a detailed description of the Dhungri temple see Jettmar (1974: 40-46).

focus on her importance for the villages near her temple, Dhungri and Old Manali. For many inhabitants of these villages she is the supreme deity ruling over the inhabited and cultivated area belonging to these places. She is said to be the one who brings rain, provides fertility for land and animals, and cares for the wellbeing of the families and persons in her vicinity. She is also said to keep demons and malevolent spirits at bay. Her protection is not given automatically, but has to be obtained by subservience and obedience, and regular gifts including occasional animal sacrifices. Her queenlike position, however, is not accentuated by the daily temple services to the same degree as Lord Raghunāth in his permanent temple. One reason for this may be the absence of any three-dimensional icon of her in her temple. Her main representation consists of a hole underneath a huge rock, therefore certain elements of worship deriving from royal court etiquette – like bathing, dressing, parading the cult image – are less important than in the case of tangible images. Explicitly royal aspects become apparent, however, as soon as the goddess is presented in the form of her "masks" (*mohre*) on her palanquin (*rath*).¹⁴

Haḍimbā's *rath* is regularly assembled and presented to the public at her yearly temple festival in May, at the local Bahadur Singh Fair in June, and also whenever she sets out to visit deities in other villages, or to accept the invitation of particular families who have invited her. Her most spectacular outing is the one to Kullu town some thirty miles away to take part in the annual Daśahrā celebrations. Village deities from other places are invited to both the May festival and the Bahadur Singh fair. The deities who come pay respect to her as the hostess and supreme deity of the place and are in turn welcomed as respected guests whose entourage is fed and housed by the Dhungri/Old Manali villagers.

The assembling of the *rath* is not done by Haḍimbā Devī's priests in the Dhungri temple but by her medium (*gur*) and her first drummer, both of them Harijans, on the platform of Manu Ṛṣi's temple in Old Manali.¹⁵ Like most village deities Haḍimbā Devī has a *gur*, who is one of the most important members of her entourage. The final invocation of the goddess into the *rath* and the *pūjās* in front of the *rath* are performed by one of the

¹⁴ There are thirteen *mohre* altogether; twelve are said to depict her, the thirteenth is the representation of Manu Ṛṣi with whom she shares the *rath*. All the faces have moustaches with the exception of the one down at the front which shows a young female wearing a crown and a bridal nose-ring.

¹⁵ Manu Ṛṣi's temple is the place where Haḍimbā's *rath* is kept when not in use. Her *mohre* and other paraphernalia are kept in her treasury house (*bhaṇḍar*) which was erected in the middle of Old Manali.



Fig. 3: The *rath* of goddess Hadimba being led by the Raja's messenger to the royal palace in Kullu-Sultanpur. (Photo: B. Luchesi)

Brahmin priests of the Dhungri temple. Throughout her public appearances, the goddess is accompanied by her medium and at least one of her priests. Important other functionaries are the two *kārdārs* (managers). In the past, *kārdārs* were responsible for the distribution and management of the temple land. Like many other village deities Haḍimbā Devī had been allotted land by the former rulers of Kullu. The produce of the land was given as remuneration to the priests and the other servants of the goddess. Today, after the land reforms in Himachal Pradesh in the 1950s and 1960s, most of the land became the property of the former tillers of the soil and only parts of it still belong to the Devī. Nevertheless the office of *kārdār* has remained,¹⁶ as has the office of the *kāmdārs* who act as assistants to the *kārdārs*. Other members of the Devī's staff include a number of musicians, two men from the gardener caste, one from the oil-presser caste, one carpenter, and several bearers.¹⁷

Haḍimbā Devī's public appearances are always occasions when her high position becomes unmistakably visible: the *rath* is richly decorated with multicoloured scarves and covered with precious ornaments and fresh flowers; like a queen she is announced by the drummers and various wind instruments, she is accompanied by her staff; her sceptre is carried in front of her. The parade always starts from the temple in Old Manali and then takes the path down through the old part of the village where the inhabitants are waiting in front of their houses to greet her with flowers and gifts and pay homage to her. One cannot but be reminded of a respected female ruler inspecting her territory and honouring her subjects with her visit.

When outside her temple the goddess is expected to communicate with her subjects: either by the movements of her *rath* which are understood as expressions of her current mood – delight, displeasure, anger etc. – or by the utterances of her *gur* in trance. Her frequent presentation as easily excitable and obstinate, as a wild and dangerous deity, seems to underline her superior position.¹⁸ This is especially the case when her annoyance is interpreted as wrath directed at her subjects because of misdemeanours or violation of her commands. Frequently the

¹⁶ Haḍimbā Devī has two, one is a member of the Brahmin family in Dhungri, the other is from Old Manali. There is also a second *gūr*, mouthpiece of Manu Ṛṣi.

¹⁷ For more details see Diserens (1995-96). On the staff of local deities in general, see Vidal (1988: 79-90).

¹⁸ She displays most of the characteristics commonly assigned to the *ugra* type of Indian goddesses (Michaels e.a. 1996: 22-24).

Devī is explicitly requested to say something, to decide village disputes¹⁹, disclose the causes of disasters and inexplicable events, or predict some future development. Interestingly, the goddess need not appear in the form of her *rath* in order to be able to fulfil these requests for pronouncements, but may be represented by her sceptre. In this form emphasising her rulership, she may also accept private invitations from families to honour a celebration or to help discern the causes of misfortune.

To sum up, Haḍimbā Devī is the supreme local goddess for the villagers of Dhungri and Old Manali. She is believed to exert tremendous influence on their lives. So it is considered advisable to keep her favourably disposed towards her subjects. Haḍimbā Devī is also understood to represent the village to the outside, which becomes especially apparent when she – either as a hostess or a guest – meets other village deities, who are in turn considered to be representatives of their villages. The queenlike position ascribed to her by the pragmatic actions of her staff and her devotees becomes obvious to all when she is shown moving around in the form of her mobile cult image but also when she takes action with regard to village land, which will be discussed below.

Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi

Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi's name and the legends associated with him are reminiscent of the famous seer described in classical literature. There ṛṣis are not usually counted among the gods; in Kullu, however, they are worshipped as *devtās*. Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi has a temple in Vashisht, a village which is well known for its hot sulphur springs; it therefore attracts quite a number of tourists from India and abroad. The temple is situated in the middle of the village, down below a *śikhara*-style stone temple dedicated to God Rāma and his consort Sītā. Vasiṣṭha's abode is a rather inconspicuous building made of stone and wood in the typical log cabin style of the region. A gateway leads from the main village square into the courtyard of the temple, from where there is access to the bathing tanks with hot water. The immovable central cult image, housed in a separate wooden cell in the middle of the temple, is made of black stone; the shining bright eyes are a striking feature. The image is clad in a white *dhotī* and turban and is adorned with a sacred thread giving it the appearance of an ascetic. Unlike various other village deities, including Haḍimbā Devī, Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi is known to be a vegetarian god, abhorring animal sacrifices and alcohol. His priest is a Brahmin who inherits this office from his forefathers. He lives in a house at the corner of the temple enclosure with one of its doors

¹⁹ Cf. Berti (1998, 1999).

leading into the temple courtyard. Vasiṣṭha's medium (*gur*) comes from the Thakur community to which the majority of the villagers belong.

Despite his distinguishing ascetic features, Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi shares many characteristics with Haḍimbā and other village deities of the Upper Kullu Valley. He is considered to be the protector of Vashisht village and its inhabitants against *rākṣasas* (demons) and other enemies, the provider of fertility for land, animals and people, the supreme authority in cases of dispute, and a deity who will certainly punish those who neglect him or act against his will. He, too, may appear in the form of his *rath*. The main occasions for public appearances are his temple festival in April, his annual *yātrā* (tour) up to Brighu Lake where he bathes, and festivals of various other village gods that he attends, among them Haḍimbā's fair in May. His mood, like that of most of the *devtās/devīs* of this region, can be determined by the movements of his *rath*; otherwise his *gur* expresses his will. Of special significance for Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi are the hot springs of the northern Kullu District, which he is said to have created.²⁰ The sulphur springs of Vashisht village in particular are considered to be medicinal, and so powerful that not only pilgrims and ordinary visitors bathe in them but also various *devtās* and *devīs*, who are brought to Vashisht to take a bath too. In fact these *devtās* and *devīs* are said to be obliged to visit at least once a year.²¹ This enhances the position of Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi: he is awarded the highest rank among those village deities called *ṛṣis* and often referred to as the most important *devtā* of the Upper Kullu Valley.²² He does not join the Daśahrā festival in the town of Kullu; instead his *rath* is carried to the neighbouring Sītārāma temple where it stays during the Daśahrā days.

Vasiṣṭha's appearance as an ascetic and his characterisation as a vegetarian *sādhu* suggest the picture of a mainly peaceful *devtā* staying in a remote *āśrama* (hermitage) and not prone to display royal attitudes and aspirations. However a closer look reveals something else. First of all, Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi is known to be extremely irritable, a *devtā* easily angered and ready to curse immediately – characteristics he shares with the *ṛṣis* of classical literature. One of the local stories has it that his original *āśrama* was in Old Manali where he was given food by the villagers. Finding animal bones in his bowl he immediately flew into a rage, cursed the fields of Old Manali and moved across the Beas River to Vashisht. Among his preferred divine associates are two other *ṛṣis*, Gautam Ṛṣi and Byās Ṛṣi

²⁰ See Jettmar-Thakur (1984a: 34-5).

²¹ There are some exceptions like *devtā* Jamlū from Malana.

²² A kind of competition goes on between him and Haḍimbā Devī: some say that she is inferior to him because of her past as a demoness and her Harijan *gūr*, which is naturally denied by her staff. In any case he is given the highest place of honour when he takes part in her *melā*.

from village Goshal. The two *ṛṣis* are represented on a single *rath* together with Kānā Nāg, a very active snake deity who keeps close contact with a large number of his snake deity relatives in the valley. Other close acquaintances are Prasara Ṛṣi from Kulang and Kartik Swāmī from the village Simsa whom people describe as a very pugnacious *devtā* and particularly unrelenting in legal matters. Sometimes the fierce Haḍimbā Devī is among Vasiṣṭha's associates, as in 2004 on the occasion of Vasiṣṭha's temple festival. All these deities are known to be easily aroused, and the punishments they threaten to impose are said to really happen. Western observers are perhaps inclined to take these beliefs as a colourful part of the traditional lore about the *devtās*, however in narrating how these beliefs play out in people's lives, I hope to show the full reach of the village deities' power.²³



Fig. 4: Women of Vashisht village worshipping Vashishtha Rishi on the first day of his temple festival. In front his medium (left) and his *kardar*. (Photo: B. Luchesi)

²³ I first learned about the following events during a visit in the Manali area in 2001. I continued visiting Vashisht village in May 2002, April 2003, April/May 2004 and fall 2005. I am especially grateful to Tara Chand, Gabriele Jettmar-Thakur, Yogaraj Thakur and Pandit Rohit Ram for providing information and help.

I was told in 2001 that early in the same year, a family in Old Manali had invited Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi to come to their village and into their house. They wanted to find out why several family members had died, fallen ill or suffered from other misfortunes. They learned through the mouth of Vasiṣṭha's *gur* that the cause of all their afflictions was that they had built a house on ground not belonging to them. In order to evade further misfortune they were advised to vacate this house and destroy it. Soon afterwards Haḍimbā Devī, too, confirmed these findings. Besides that, she accused other families of being guilty of the same transgression. All of them were given a year's notice to remove the verandas, walls or entire houses she found fault with. Only a short time later Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi started to brand buildings in his own village Vashisht as illegally erected: during his temple festival in April 2001 his *gur* announced that several cases of illegal land encroachment had taken place in the village – especially near the two temples. Things were not left at that. The *devtā* who had been brought out of the temple in the form of his *rath* started to take action. I learned that while outside his temple in the market area he made his carriers push the massive wooden poles of the palanquin into the huts and market stalls near the southern wall of the Vasiṣṭha temple so that they collapsed showing his angry mood. In the same way the new structure above the well to the west was demolished. Several stone and concrete buildings which withstood the attacks were "marked" by the *rath*: people said that it moved right in front of them and repeatedly touched them with the poles thereby indicating the god's wish to have them removed. In this way a number of walls, protruding house parts and whole buildings around the main village square were "marked," along with parts of the temple complex itself, such as the so-called *serai*, parts of which had been used by the priest as a kitchen or rented out. Finally the house of the priest came under attack. Reasons given for this were the supposedly illegal extension of the western front and new windows in the upper storeys from where one could overlook the women's bath tank. The protesting priest, I was told, argued with the *devtā* on the *rath*, emphasising his faithful service throughout the years. In the end he asked to carry the *rath* himself and changed place with the man in the front position – and, so the story goes, pushed the poles into his own house. People took this as evidence that human machinations and village politics were not at play but rather that Vasiṣṭha himself had taken action.

The outcome of all these events was that in both villages, in Old Manali and Vashisht, various buildings were partly or entirely torn down. In May 2002 I witnessed the demolition of a protruding veranda only hours before Haḍimbā's *rath* was made, i.e. the goddess "came out". In Vashisht I saw several demolished buildings; on a number of houses protruding roofs or other parts had been knocked off. The most visible changes had occurred

at the western and southern sides of Vasiṣṭha's temple area: the structure above the entrance and the *serai* had been completely rebuilt. The money to finance the renewal of these buildings, especially the new wooden carvings, had been collected among the inhabitants of Vashisht village but also in the entire Upper Kullu Valley. Most of the construction work had been accomplished by the villagers themselves by sending at least one member of a family to do *sevā*, i.e. unpaid voluntary work. The village square, too, had changed. It looked larger and the demolition of stalls, walls and other constructions allowed an unhindered view of both village temples. The space below the Sītārāma temple was vacant. But not for long. While clearing the area a stone shaped like a *liṅga* had been found which was soon understood as a *svayambhū*, i.e. a self-manifestation of Lord Śiva.²⁴ Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi was approached and asked what to do and how to proceed. The result was that within a year a small wooden temple was erected above this stone. By April 13th, 2003, the first day of Vasiṣṭha's temple festival, it was more or less completed. Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi and his divine guests on their *raths* came close to inspect it, demonstrating their judgement by their movements: their *gurs* entered the building and conveyed the opinions of the *devtās*. Apart from some minor points the new place for Śiva was accepted by them.

More important in the present context is the behaviour Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi and his visitors showed towards other buildings. Masses of people watched the *devtās* moving across the square and through the village lanes. The gods on their *raths* seemed to be inspecting the changes that had taken place since the last temple festival. Occasionally they could be seen pushing their poles against certain corners or walls. Villagers interpreted this as the *devtās'* command to remove these buildings, too. After the festival it was said that the gods had again given a year's notice to obey their wishes. In April 2004 similar scenes could be observed, not only in Vashisht but also in Old Manali where Haḍimbā Devī attacked a building before starting out towards Vashisht. In Vashisht it was again the house of the priest that was one of the main targets of the *devtās*. Thus, the worries and problems of a family in Old Manali marked the beginning of a chain of events that resulted in the demolition of several buildings in the two villages and the construction of a new temple in one of the cleared spaces – the latter action also meaning that the empty terrain was immediately occupied by a piece of sacred architecture. I cannot go into a discussion of the property laws, which are undoubtedly relevant here. What I find most striking is the extraordinary emphasis placed on the role of the *devtās* as supreme authority with regard to land. The procedure originally followed is a well-known one: a family in need of help and

²⁴ Cf. Luchesi (2004).

advice turns to a deity; it learns that it has inadvertently done something wrong; in order to end its misfortune it is told to rectify the improper action – in our case, to remove the building. The sequence is: misfortune, consultation with the deity, announcement of the reason for the misfortune (wrath of the deity because of a transgression), countermeasures to appease the deity. But soon the sequence changed: the first step now is the announcement by the deity that a transgression has taken place, and only then comes the threat of pending misfortune (in case the given orders are not followed). The gods appear as independently active authorities who publicly and independently battle against land encroachments, without being consulted. The accusation and the warning of criminal proceedings are not enough: the deities themselves start to take action. Their *raths* turn into weapons of destruction,²⁵ a most dramatic demonstration of their power.

Fighting enemies and protecting territory

The way the three deities I have introduced are approached and treated by their priests and devotees also show that they are regarded as rulers with royal authority. This is immediately apparent in those cases where there are regular temple *pūjās* performed by priests in front of anthropomorphic cult images (Raghunāth, Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi). But it is even more apparent in those situations where the deities are brought out of their temples, either in the form of the regular icon (Raghunāth) or as temporary representations in form of *raths* (Haḍimbā, Vasiṣṭha Ṛṣi). Their public appearances are normally combined with processions or parades through the territory that is believed to be under their protection and jurisdiction. The organisation and outward appearance of these parades follow the example of the former human kings and rulers; they depict the deity as "*rājā*" or "*rānī*" in relation to their subjects.

During certain festivals the deities' roles as supreme defenders and protectors are even more emphasised than usual. As an example I have sketched the activities of Lord Raghunāth during the Daśahrā festival: he can be seen as the divine king Rāma ready for battle, fighting against the demon king Rāvaṇa and, by defeating him, restoring peace and dharmic order. The enactment of the heroic deeds of Rāma brings to mind his role as a perfect king and thus keeps alive the notion of an ideal universal order, "*Rām-rājya*", Rama's kingdom.

²⁵ Well remembered is Haḍimbā's attack on a police car in Kullu town several years ago.

Village deities who are not understood as manifestations or *avatāras* of Viṣṇu are not likened to Lord Rāma. In former times they were dependent on the generosity of the *rājās* and were understood to be subordinate to their state deity, Lord Raghunāth. They were obliged to come to the Kullu festival and pay homage to both *rājā* and *devtā*. In the great enactment of Rāma/Raghunāth's glorious deeds they were assigned roles as allies and supporters of the divine king. Many of them continue to play these roles and thus help to keep the idea of Rāma's actions alive. The true places of action of the village deities, however, are their respective villages. There, they are the ones who are considered to be the main defenders and protectors of men and territory. They are believed to have various powers and a strong will in exercising them. In comparison with Lord Raghunāth's position, their power and influence appear more real. They tell people how to react in disastrous situations or decide cases of dispute within the village or between villages. They are understood as forces taking actual, not just symbolic care of their territory. The recent events in Vashisth village and Old Manali have shown them to be extremely active in questions of so-called land encroachment. That they can enforce their will – as is demonstrated by the demolition of several houses – dramatises how they are still considered to be deities with supreme authority and king-like power.

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