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**(Chapter 8)**

## Divine Jurisdictions and Forms of Government in Himachal Pradesh

DANIELA BERTI

Like the flowers of a garland, the inhabitants of a *hār* (territory of a God) are bound together (Vidyachand Thakur, Kullu 2001)

Travelling on the roads in the Kullu Valley in Himachal Pradesh, one may notice a visible sign that suggests a territorial division according to divine jurisdictions. The more you enter into such a jurisdiction, the more you will come across vehicles with the name of the specific god of the area written in self-adhesive letters on their windscreen.

That village gods live in delimited territories is a common feature attested throughout the subcontinent. Studies on regional pantheons, particularly in the Himalaya, have shown the political, administrative, and economic dimensions involved in such local cults. In Tehri Garhwal, for instance, Sax (1991) notes that the public processions of the deities' palanquins carried by villagers in the territories of earlier kingdoms, cancelled out 'in practice the academic distinctions among politics, economics and ritual' (Sax 1991: 203). In a similar perspective, Toffin (1993) considers the structure of the Indo-Buddhist Newar pantheon in the Kathmandu Valley as 'a total social phenomenon ... at once religious, territorial and politico-administrative' (Toffin 1993:120).

Such interrelations between various dimensions of social life are not without theoretical consequences in the field of Indian studies. There has been a strong and lasting influence (particularly in France) of Dumont's general theory on Indian society, according to which political and economic power, as well as territory, are separate from the ideological

sphere of religion, since they are encompassed by it and subordinated to it.<sup>1</sup> According to Dumont and Pocock, ‘the territorial factor, the relation to the soil is not, in India as a whole, one of the primary factors in social organization. It is a secondary factor in relation to the two fundamental factors of kinship and caste’ (Dumont and Pocock 1957: 18). Territory, being not included in what Dumont calls the ‘ideology’ or system of ideas, beliefs, and values (Dumont 1966: 15), is thus devoid of cognitive significance.

The present paper concerns a Himalayan region that corresponds to the former Kullu kingdom. I analyse how territory has been taught, organized, and transformed in various ways and in different periods, according to a plurality of interrelated logics: ritual, political, fiscal, administrative, and electoral. My aim is to show that territory is not only the basis of ritual and political organization or individual identity; it is also a central topic of reflection and of explicit discourse.

The analysis will focus on the notion of *hār*, used in the region to designate the area considered to be the jurisdiction of a specific god. A lawyer from Kullu, B.C. Thakur, suggested the following definition:

*Hār* indicates the area in which devotees of a particular deity reside. It refers, essentially, to a territory inside which the inhabitants use to honour a specific deity. In a wider sense, *hār* can designate the people who live in a particular territory (*kṣetra*) belonging to a deity, which are called also its *hārye* (inhabitants of the *hār*) and which are considered as the political subjects (*prajā*) of the deity. The inhabitants of a *hār* are territorially linked one another by the ties they have with the deity.

This definition points towards different aspects of the notion of *hār*: it is a clearly delimited divine territory; it points to the sovereignty of the deity over the inhabitants of this territory, defined as its ‘political subjects’; it entails territorial ties between the inhabitants at a same *hār*. These various aspects will be analysed in the following pages by taking into account successive forms of government in the region: first, a kingdom progressively came to

be established in the seventeenth century; then the British colonial administration took over by the end of the nineteenth century; last, the region became part of the democratic Indian state, following Independence. The scale of observations will also vary, taking into account either a village, or a group of villages, or the territory (once corresponding to the kingdom of Kullu) which nowadays forms an electoral constituency. The first part of the paper considers the *hār* from a historical perspective, by using oral accounts as well as colonial reports. In the latter case I will mostly refer to the manuscript of W.H. Emerson, a British administrator of early twentieth century. This document is full of details about the territorial jurisdictions of the local deities, and shows how British administrators were occasionally called upon to interfere in the management of the cults of village deities. The second part of the paper will focus on the contemporary period, for which I will use ethnographical material collected during different spells of field-work between 1995 and 2001.

First, I will briefly describe the main characteristics of the deities concerned.

### **Village gods as "social actors"**

The expression *devī-devtā* (literally 'goddess-god') is used in the Kullu Valley to speak of the deities of the village temples. The worship of these village deities involves the intervention of various temple functionaries -priest, medium, administrator, musicians. Each deity is considered to exercise his/her power within a delimited area, the *hār*, and the inhabitants of this area turn to him/her to ask for rain or sunshine, or to cure a villager's disease or solve a problem, or to arbitrate village conflicts.

Each village deity has a medium, the *gur*, who undergoes public initiation. When consulted, the medium shows (culturally expected) signs of divine possession, and begins to speak on behalf of the deity. A village deity can also express itself through the movements of its palanquin, the *rath*, carried on the shoulders of the villagers at festivals. These movements are supposed to be provoked by the deity and not the bearers. Villagers decode such movements as expressing the deity's feelings, intentions and desires in response to a specific situation. For the devotees, the medium's words and the palanquin's movements allow village gods to communicate, to participate in village life, and to take decisions.

The worship of these deities is in the hands of an administrator (*kārdār*) and a group of villagers who form the temple committee; they usually belong to high castes. Low-caste villagers participate in the worship, too, as musicians, medium, and devotees.<sup>2</sup> Most of the village gods were previously the lineage deity of some dominant families in the region. Even today the worship of a deity may be the responsibility of one or several families. The god Balu Nāg, for instance, in the Banjar area, has ties with the Bhatta family, whose members still take the most important decisions concerning his worship. If we consider the god's story, however, priority is clearly given to territorial links over those of lineage. According to one story, Balu Nāg settled in the region of Banjar on arrival from the nearby district of Mandi, and the Bhatta family happened to be the first to worship him. Even when a village deity is linked to a particular family in the region, he differs from the category of 'lineage deity' by holding sovereignty over all those who live in his territory. These people form the *hār*, or *hārye*,<sup>3</sup> independently of kinship ties or caste status. The way for the deity to express his/her sovereignty is to bring benefits and punishments upon those living within his/her jurisdiction.

### **Authority over land and territory**

The influence that village gods still exercise on the inhabitants of their territories through their mediums is often presented by local scholars as one of the reasons that forced past kings of the region to establish political relations with them, by means of alliance or subjugation. It is at least in these terms that M.R. Thakur interprets the decision of king Jagat Singh (seventeenth century) to introduce the worship of an outsider, Raghunāth (a form of Rāma), into the kingdom. The king declared this god to be the real 'king of Kullu', to whom all local deities had therefore to bow in reverence and obedience.<sup>4</sup> In addition to this act of politico-religious centralization, Jagat Singh also assigned land to different village gods, who then became *muāfīdār devtā* (landholding deities). Following this, and as a sign of political subordination, the village gods were obliged to pay an annual tribute (*nazarānā*) to Raghunāth. They also, for fear of being fined, had to visit the capital once a year during the annual festival in order to pay homage to the royal god and to his human delegate, the Raja of Kullu.

The king exercised control over the management of worship in the villages by influencing, for example, the choice of a medium, the nomination of the temple administrator, or even by imposing the specific style in which a god's palanquin had to be built. He could also exercise some 'pressure' on village gods in connection with the power (*śakti*) they were supposed to have over atmospheric conditions within their territorial jurisdiction. In times of drought, for instance, the king used to organize in the palace a 'universal consultation' (*jagī pūch*) of all the deities of the kingdom (through their mediums) in order to ask them to give rain. Local narratives add that, when the demand was not satisfied, the king would consider the mediums answerable for the gods' failure and would threaten to have their heads cut off if the rain did not come at once.

Villagers could also call upon the king's mediation to solve cases of more limited 'territorial droughts'. The measures to be taken in such circumstances were normally decided by the king or, in his absence, by one of his representatives. When the region fell under British control, the Administrator occasionally had to assume a royal role. One of them, Emerson, reports such an instance. When he was governing the region of Shimla, one day he received the visit of some villagers. They had come to ask him to punish the mediums of a very famous god in the region, Kamru Nāg, considered to be responsible for the rain shortage.

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 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 Nag'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 in 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).

If the king - as reported by Emerson - had the right to punish inefficient gods through their mediums, he rewarded with land gifts or privileges those deities who satisfied his requests. Many stories of royal donations tell how a deity received a certain amount of land from the king as a reward for having brought rain in times of need.<sup>5</sup>

The relations between the central authority, exerted by the king on behalf of god Raghunāth, and the local authority, exerted by villagers on behalf of village deities, seem to have always been complex and ambiguous. In his study of the economic and political importance of village gods in Kinnaur, Singh (1989: 89) notes that the kings 'used the devtas as their representatives for manifesting royal presence in remote areas.... Since the Raja did not frequently visit Kinnaur, the devta's frequent tours on his behalf manifested divine sanction for the Raja's rule.'

The territorial implications of local cults thus appear to have been a crucial element in royal politics. On the one hand, the assignation of land (*muāfi*) to village deities can be interpreted as a political and religious form of centralization, for the prerogatives that local deities already enjoyed in their own territories now had to be sanctioned by the palace. Consequently, the king could also delegate to a local god his royal presence in distant regions.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the control exercised by the king over the management of the cults had politico-territorial implications, for instance, the protection of the boundaries of the kingdom. As a rule villagers were not allowed to change the style of their god's palanquin unless so authorized by the king (Emerson 1920: 64); this was due to the fact that, since the style of a palanquin is associated with a specific kingdom, it would have meant that the god's supporters had established alliances with neighbouring kingdoms (Vidal 1998: 64). Thus, the

need to control boundaries appears to be very present in the Kullu kings' political preoccupations. True, this way of constructing politico-territorial boundaries did not necessarily involve map-making or physical delimitation, but was established through other symbolic means. It suggests in any case the need to reconsider the idea that that territory in India was defined by taking into account its centre, not its boundaries.

Another stereotype likely to be refuted by the present data is the assertion that the king ruled over territory not conceptually differentiated from a population, as suggested by the term *janapada*, which Dumont translated as 'population-cum-territory' and which he relied on to discriminate between what he claimed to be the ancient Hindu conception of kingship and the modern Western idea of nation, where territorial sovereignty implies the property of the land (Dumont 1966: 393).<sup>7</sup> A different interpretation of the territorial conceptions linked to ancient Indian kingship is however given by R. Lingat (1967), which better fits the data for the kingdom of Kullu. In studying the *Dharmaśāstra*, the author identifies two main notions associated with kingship: the notion of *rājādharmā*, the duties and obligations of the king to which he is submitted independently of the extension or localization of his territory, and the notion of *kṣatra* which is, by contrast, 'a power which is territorial in character, not only because it is applied within a territory and ends at the frontiers of the kingdom, but because it is conceived ... as a regal right over territory, akin to a proprietary right that gives direct power over land and soil' (Lingat 1967: 237, my translation).

In any case, the overall property of the land itself was far from being an unknown component of sovereignty in the Himalayan kingdoms (at least), a fact already fully emphasized by the British administrators as shown by this passage from Lyall's *Gazetteer*: 'Under the Rājahs, the theory of property in land was that each Rājah was the landlord of the whole of his 'Rāj' or principality. ... The Rājah was not, like a feudal king, lord paramount over inferior lords of manors, but rather, as it were, manorial lord of his whole country' (Lyall 1874: 24).

The donation of land to village gods as well as the donation of the kingdom to Raghunāth emphasizes the importance given to landed property in the exercise of political sovereignty, which is directly legitimated here by deities.



### **Divine properties (*muāfi*) and areas of influence (*hār*): the British period**

With the beginning of the colonial period we have more information about divine territories and how they were managed by the British. When the latter settled in the region in the second half of the nineteenth century and undertook a revenue settlement, the first thing they noticed was the importance of land which came under the name of village gods. In his field notes, Coldstream<sup>8</sup> wrote that in the subdivision of Prini :

‘[The god] Jamlu has a muafi [property exempted from taxes] of 94 [acri] in Prini and [the goddess] Sawari one of 42 [acres]. Two other deota [gods] have pretty assignments...[In the sub-division of Vashisht] seven gods have muafi in Vashist and four have temples as well. [The god] Thakur Ram Chandra owns 65 acres of land and has an assignment of 64 rupees.’

The *muāfi* were usually confirmed by the British administrators. To adapt these assignments to the norms of British legislation, the administrators introduced a ‘legal artifice’ (Vidal 1988: 76): a decree equated deities with ‘moral persons’ with the legal status of children, and granted them the right to basic amenities needed for maintaining their cult (ibid.). These properties were managed by a temple administrator (*kārdār*) who was considered to be the god's ‘tutor’.<sup>9</sup>

The British administrators reported the difficulties they had in registering these assignments for which often no kind of documents was available:

In taking a general view of the temple maafis in Tahsil Kullu, the first thing that strikes one is the great amount of land they possess ... I have thought that the amount of land belonging to temples in Kullu was most excessive, and should somehow or other be reduced, but after taking up and investigating a number of cases I came to the conclusion that it must be treated in a free, not technical manner. In the absence of sanads [written assignments] or ancient list

of maafis [holdings], and for lack of maps or field books, which were not produced at the original settlement, it was not possible with all the untrustworthy evidence to say what the area originally granted by the Rajas was ... There was no doubt that temple lands had often been held without sanads, and that many sanads had been lost in the disturbances before annexation.

Even if British colonial policy, as a rule, was to avoid interfering with local practices, it is quite possible that the survey they conducted favoured this or that local deity. A traveller in that period, Enriquez, informs us that a deity in the area was extremely angry because the revenue settlement did not properly ascertain the extent of his lands. The author also reports an episode showing how frequent it was at the time for a villager to transfer part of his land to a deity:<sup>10</sup>

the priests [of the temple] insisted on the sanction of Government being obtained for such a gift, because they said, the transfer under the Land Alienation Act, could not legally take place without such sanction, except to an agriculturist, and the deota, as they pointed out, was a god and not an agriculturist. The case was sent up to Government, and sanctioned (Enriquez 1915: 44).

The Gazetteers show that at the time of the arrival of the British in the region, the extension of a deity's *hār* never coincided with land cultivated in its name (*muāfi*). Emerson reports many cases in which a 'deity' tried to assert its own influence over the territories belonging to other neighbouring deities, also asking the inhabitants of these territories to pay tribute as a sign of their submission. The case of god Mahāsū, whose worship spread all over the region of Shimla, is a good example:

For twelve years on end he is continuously on tour, visiting the various tracts where his worship has been adopted, accompanied by a retinue that grows fat on the offerings of the people. He [the god] chooses the richest and most pleasant villages to halt in, which have to bear the burden of his exactions. But the neighbouring villages do not escape scot free. Every family of his subjects in this districts through which he passes has to contribute one rupee and eight annas towards his expenses, the rupee being kept by his priest and the annas paid into his treasury. ... Many other contributions were also exacted such as ghi, goats and supplies of various sorts. ... To check these exactions, summary orders were passed in the presence of the assembled elders, banishing the god and his attendants from one district, and commanding his Wazir to abstain from accepting any invitation on the part of Mahasu without the sanction of Government. (Emerson, *manuscript*, p. 11-4)

Emerson's observations do not allow us to grasp the social implications of such conquering actions. They show, however, how the British administration could disapprove of what the text describes as 'exactions' and could intervene therefore, through official actions, in order to put a stop to the expansionistic plans of a deity.<sup>11</sup>

What also emerges from a story like this is how the extension of a deity's *hār* and the importance a deity assumes in the regional pantheon are subject to historical transformations. The worship of certain important deities may disappear, while that of new deities may be adopted by an increasing number of people.

Such expansion does not imply, however, that the territory within which a deity receives tribute is its 'property'. Land assignments, in fact, could be carried out in the form of *muāfi* only by the king, and subsequently by the British administration. A deity's area of influence therefore does not correspond to its landed property, even if a deity endowed with a large amount of land is considered powerful and influential throughout the region.

Following Independence, an event provoked a radical transformation in the regional pantheon's equilibrium and in relations between village deities and their land. In 1972, Indira Gandhi's government promulgated the 'Pass Tenant Act', giving the opportunity to cultivators, including those who cultivated the gods' lands, to become owners. As a consequence, village deities, also called *paisevāle devtā*, 'deities with money', lost a large part of their holdings. All the deities that had given their land for cultivation at the time of the reform were deprived of their means of subsistence; the others have been able to preserve considerable holdings up to the present today. Some deities, whose land was formerly not cultivable, found themselves suddenly rich as a consequence of the introduction of apple orchards on land unsuitable for rice or other grain (Vidal 1988). Since this reform, those who cultivated gods' land in exchange for services rendered to the temple (priests, mediums, and musicians) have become owners; they were no longer obliged by law to continue providing services to the temple.<sup>12</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain the impact of this reform on local cults. The registers dating back to colonial time show that at the beginning of the twentieth century some deities whose cult is today abandoned or is extremely reduced, possessed an important amount of land. However, we cannot be sure that a lapse in worship was caused only by the impoverishment of the divinity. Long before land reforms, Emerson, reports, many stories showing how abandonment of cults were frequent and could result from a decision by villagers to react to the 'inefficiency' of the deity.

[The god of rain, Goli Nāg] originally dwelt in Kulu, where for many generations he never failed to send the rain and sunshine at their proper season. Suddenly, however, ... he began to send nothing but rain, forgetting all about the need of sunshine. His followers tolerated this for some time [until when] they thought it time to give him some experience of the element he loved so much. So one wet day they took his idol, images and litter in procession to the river Sutlej and threw them into the torrent, an act of justice which, no doubt,

gave them some satisfaction for their ruined crops. (Emerson, *manuscript*, p. 9-10)

The story goes on. After Goli Nāg's palanquin was thrown into the river, one of his metal masks was found on the riverbank by a passer-by who, happy to find such a treasure, took it home. In his village the god then started to manifest his presence by sending impressive floods, which destroyed the whole harvest and spread terror among the people. Local mediums were consulted. They revealed that the one responsible for these disasters was Goli Nāg, whose mask was somewhere in the village. Through the mediums the god asked to be set up in place of a local goddess, and to receive daily worship.

So Goli Nag passed through the waters of tribulation to a lofty temple, where he has dwelt in ease and honour ever since. Only occasionally, bored by the unending alternation of the season, he turns summer into winter, or sends the rains at harvest time.

This story illustrates the kind of transformation to which divine territories have been submitted: a village god abandoned by his own people in his own jurisdiction, and whose palanquin is thrown into the river, can be adopted by the inhabitants of a neighbouring village as the main god, with a new jurisdiction. The following pages will detail the ties established between a village deity and the inhabitants of its jurisdiction, and will also show how the rituals followed within the *hār* are related to the system of land taxation applied in the region during the colonial government.

### **Ritual territories and fiscal units**

In order to define a god's territory, Kullu people make reference to ancient administrative units that existed before the colonial period, and which were adopted by them in order to organize the collection of land taxes: the *phātī*, which includes a group of villages, and the *koṭ hi*, which includes a number of *phātī*.

An administrator, Lyall, reports that at the time of the Rājā's rule, *koṭhi* meant a granary in which the grain that the peasants gave to the king as land tax was collected. The term was also applied to indicate the boundary of villages whose tax was put into the same granary. The *phātī* was a sub-division of the *koṭhi*, a term referring not so much to a territory as to a population sharing the services or the forced labour due to the king (Lyall 1874: 119).

The two terms were later adopted by colonial administrators in order not only to organize their revenue settlement and the collection of land taxes, but also as a criterion to distinguish various *devī-devtā* by referring to the extension of their area of influence. Thus, Lyall writes in his official gazette:

Most of these deotas [deities] are merely objects of worship of a single hamlet, or of one or two neighbouring hamlets; many, however, are known as the deo or devi of the whole of a *phati*, or of a whole *kothi*. A few of the larger and more noted shrines are generally respected, and their festivals attended by men from all the surrounding *kothis*, or by men of one or more waziris.

According to Lyall, the divisions in *phātī* and *koṭhi* reflected the dominions of the ancient chiefs who had controlled the region before the centralization of the kingdom. In his view, the borders of a deity's *hār* were once political, being associated with the power that a lineage or a local chief exercised on one or more villages.

The divisions in *phātī* and *koṭhi* are today used in administrative language, and still define a deity's *hār*.<sup>13</sup> In some regions, this *hār* covers a certain number of *phātī* included in different *koṭhi*; in this case, people will speak of a 'five *phātī* deity' or of a 'seven *phātī* deity'. A clear indication of the limits of a divine jurisdiction is the contribution to the expenses for annual or occasional ritual activities celebrated in honour of the deities. The frequency of the contribution varies according to the territorial level of the divinity: the inhabitants of a village regularly participate in all the rituals celebrated in their village deity's temple, whereas they contribute on an irregular basis to those organized for the deity of the *phātī* or of the *koṭhi*.

Moreover, the multiple and relative territorial limits concern the influence that every divinity exercises on the territory and on its inhabitants. Such influence is also expressed during séances. For instance, Takṣak Nāg, the deity of a *koṭhi* of eight villages, used to say during consultations made at his temple: ‘blue sky here, blue sky in eight places; rain here, rain in eight places’. Or else: ‘rain from Nagar to Kullu [one *koṭhi*], blue sky from Nagar to Vasist [another *koṭhi*]; blue sky from Nagar to Kullu, rain from Nagar to Vasist’. Sometimes it is also a greater unit of the region which is evoked: a deity can say for instance ‘good things in a place; good things in seven *wazīrīs* [groups of *koṭhi*]’.

Mediums often explain an excess of rain or a drought as a result of the frequent conflicts amongst villagers, and which demand ritual reparation. In the northern part of the valley (Parol), the logic of such reparation is the same in all the different *koṭhi*: if the conflict occurs inside a village, all the villagers should be involved in the ritual reparation

The territorial influence of a *devī-devtā* is not limited to an area of worship - village, *phātī*, or *koṭhi* - but is a sort of logic determining a network of ties encompassing territories controlled by different deities. For instance, the deity of a particular village may be said to exercise influence over the entire territory of the *koṭhi*, even if inside his territory other village deities control one *phātī* or simply one or several villages. In the case of individual or village problems, only the village deity will be consulted. If the dispute affects several villages, the deity of the whole *phātī* or *koṭhi* will be asked to arbitrate the debates.<sup>14</sup> In the northern part of the valley, the logic of this interpretation is the same in all the different *koṭhis*: if a mistake has been made within a village, all its inhabitants are summoned to participate in the ritual reparation; if it involves two villages of a same *phātī*, all the villages of this *phātī* will be considered responsible; if it involves two villages of a same *koṭhi*, the whole *koṭhi* will be asked to participate. Such a rule has the effect of mobilizing all the villagers included in one *phātī* or one *koṭhi*, who will try to encourage a compromise between the parties in conflict. If they succeed, they perform a collective ritual to pacify the deity.<sup>15</sup> All the villages have to participate physically and economically in the ritual -not only those who are in conflict but

also those that are included in the same ritual subdivision, without even having any direct part in the conflict.

Let us see how this interdependence between ritual-territorial logic and the colonial fiscal-administrative system has left its imprint on the current situation.

### **Territorial punishment and fiscal responsibility**

In 1995 there was no rain in the Jagatsukh *koṭhi* for several months. There was a risk that the harvest would be completely destroyed. The inhabitants of the eight villages that formed the two *phāṭī* of this *koṭhi* were desperate. They constantly consulted the mediums of the village deities in order to find out the reasons for such a drought, and to ask for rain. The deities' answer was always the same: there was no rain and there would not be any till the two villages of Prini and Banara, fighting each other within the same *koṭhi*, put an end to their dispute. The god of Prini, Phāl Nāg, exercised his influence on a whole *phāṭī* which included three other villages. His brother, the god Takṣak Nāg of Banara, dominated the other *phāṭī* of the *koṭhi*. One of the consequences of the dispute was that the two villages refused to bring their deities' palanquins to common village festivals, in order to avoid each other.

The dispute lasted for more than a year.<sup>16</sup> All efforts to find a solution had been in vain, until Śravaṇī's medium, the goddess of one village in the *koṭhi*, promised to bring rain as soon as the villagers reached a compromise. The negotiations began, facilitated by the fact that the rain started to fall in neighbouring territories. Let us look at a passage in one séance, during which Śravaṇī, speaking through her medium, linked the lack of rain to punishment inflicted by her.

*Goddess Śravaṇī's medium:* Put your dispute on your head! You fight each other and you separated us! You play with swords and sticks but we... we have Indra-Samundra [we control the rain<sup>17</sup>]. These two brothers [the gods of the two villages in conflict] put the pillow in the opposite directions.<sup>18</sup> It was in this



way that they brought rain. When Śandal Ṛṣi [the god of a nearby village] came here, it started raining in other places. But it is in these eight villages that the rain doesn't come!

*People of the village:* Yes! In other places plenty of rain has come, but here nothing! Why doesn't the rain come here? You must tell us!

The goddess thus reveals the territorial extent of her divine wrath. Simultaneously, by stressing these limits, she reinforces the conviction that the shortage of rain was because of her disappointment at the fight between the two villages. But villagers belonging to other villages in the *koṭhi* protested about being associated with the two guilty ones, and considered it unjustified to suffer the consequences of their misdeeds.

*Villager to the goddess Śravaṇī:* O Mahārāja! [term of address for any deity] You should punish the two villages of Prini and Banara but you should do nothing to the others. If someone makes a mistake, you don't have to punish the entire world! Tell us who is guilty and then you punish him. Otherwise, if you do this, all of us will suffer! The administrators of god Phāl Nāg and of god Takṣak Nāg must find a compromise. [*addressing the two administrators:*] You both, you take the decision, here, now!

Those who found themselves involved in the dispute without being responsible for the fight tried to convince the temple administrators to reach a compromise. An agreement was eventually found. On the goddess's demand, the eight villages were required to participate financially in a reparation ritual. The decision was facilitated by the fact that during the séance, some drops of rain began to fall. On the day of the compromise, the rain arrived in abundance and all the villagers pointed out that it fell just within the limits of the *koṭhi*!

This case confirms that as far as the god is concerned, the inhabitants of a *hār* are jointly responsible. In this case, since the dispute arose between two villages whose deities

dominated two *phātī* included in the same *koṭhi*, all the inhabitants of the *koṭhi* suffered the consequences of the divine disappointment and had to contribute to the reparation.

Now, these rules of ‘divine justice’ find a curious parallel in the system of land taxation introduced by Barnes, a British administrator who introduced the revenue settlement in the region in 1851. According to this system, all the cultivators of the lands included in a *phātī* or in a *koṭhi* were *jointly responsible* for the payment of the land tax (*Punjab District Gazetteers* 1917: 145). We may wonder if the existence of a ‘joint ritual responsibility’ may have influenced the British decision to adopt a similar logic for land tax collection<sup>19</sup>. However, according to Lyall, before the arrival of the British, there was no system of joint fiscal responsibility (*ibid.*: 144 ff.).<sup>20</sup> In 1851, when Barnes introduced the new system, a headman was named for every *koṭhi* (or, if the *koṭhi* was too large, for every *phātī*) and all the tenants were made collectively responsible for tax collection (*ibid.*: 145). In Kinnaur, a region near Kullu, such a procedure was not well received and there were widespread protests:

[The ministers] did not remain passive spectators in the face of this development but reacted strongly and got this Settlement cancelled within two years... [They] justified it by saying that the 'principal god of the country had expressed an opinion that the cholera which was then raging was solely attributable to the money assessment (Singh 1989: 106).

Some administrators too criticised this system, finding it inappropriate for the socio-geographical conditions of the region. Barnes himself observed that in Kullu, contrary to villages in the north Indian plains, the land

‘instead of being a coparcenary estate, reclaimed, divided, and enjoyed by an united brotherhood, is an aggregation of isolated freeholds, quite distinct from each other, and possessing nothing in common, except that for fiscal convenience they have been massed together under one jurisdiction’ (Barnes 1885: 56).

We cannot say what motivated Barnes to introduce joint fiscal responsibility, and it is not possible to deduce from his reports whether he had any knowledge of the existence of a similar procedure in ritual contexts. Whatever the case, the consequence of this new system was that at the level of fiscal territorial units as well as of divine jurisdictions, the same logic was now adopted. In fact, in the northern part of the region (Parol), the villages named by British administrators in their official lists of *phātī* and *koṭhi* are the same as the ones jointly responsible at ritual level.

The correspondence between the ritual and fiscal system appears even more meaningful if we compare the northern part of the region with the southern territory that was assigned as *jāgīr* to the Rājā of Kullu. Whereas since 1846 a great part of the region was submitted to direct British rule, the region of Rupi in the southern part of the Valley was assigned as rent-free *jāgīr* to the then Rājā of Kullu, Thakur Singh. Until Independence, the fiscal system in the two parts differed, and such a diversity seems to have had some effects at ritual level.

Colonial administrators inform us that at the time the revenue settlement was revised in 1868, the ex-Rājā (*jāgīrdār*) and Rupi people

applied to the Settlement Officers to revise their record of right so as to bring it into accordance with the existing custom. The effect of the change *was to do away with joint responsibility* within the *koṭhi*, the jagirdar having to look to each individual landholder for payment of his quota (*Punjab District Gazetteers* 1917: 159, my emphasis)

Contrary to Parol, the joint ritual responsibility in Rupi never concerns a whole *phātī* in one *koṭhi*. It only affects some of their villages, sometimes even separate villages belonging to different *koṭhi*. Wherever joint fiscal responsibility has not been applied or, as in Rupi, has been rapidly abolished, it would seem that the most important ritual unit is not the *koṭhi* but the *phātī*, i.e. the group of people who share the services or the forced labour due to the king.

The fact that in the north the *koṭhi* is also involved in joint ritual responsibility may have been a result of the application of joint fiscal responsibility introduced during the British period.

In any case, what is certain is that in the whole region of Kullu and in nearby regions, the lists of fiscal *phātī* and *koṭhi* reported in the British gazetteers correspond to the multiple *hār* of *phātī* and *koṭhi* deities. This should be taken as a trend, since the limits of the ritual territories as well as of the fiscal ones have been subjected in the course of time to slight variations. For instance I could observe in *koṭhi* Jagatsukh (in the north of the region) that one of the three *phātī* of the ancient fiscal *koṭhi* has been recently been dropped from the joint ritual responsibility as a consequence of unresolved conflicts.

Thus, the overall correspondence between fiscal-administrative territories and ritual territories does not exclude changes in their respective limits as a consequence of the social and political transformations that have taken place in the region. Even today the administrative system and the ritual system are not rigidly fixed. In fact, village panchayats overlap with ancient fiscal units of the *phātī*, still in use. Moreover, at ritual level, transformations are obvious if one takes into account the cults of the so-called ‘new deities’ (*naī devtā*). At the origin of these new cults, there is usually the ‘discovery’ in the earth of a statue or of a metallic face, and the consequent manifestation of the deity possessing someone – usually its future medium; it reveals its name and asks to be set up in a temple and adopted by the entire village, whose territory will come under its influence.

We have seen that transformations in the pantheon also took place in the past, before and during the colonial period: some deities might lose their dominion while others might conquer more territories. If, for the past, we are not able to document in detail such transformations in their historical and sociological context, ethnographic data show how such transformations can be linked to political interests or motivations at various levels.

This last section will try to bring to light how in contemporary democratic India, divine territories continue to have politico-ritual relevance and, in some cases, can even influence the delimitation of electoral constituencies.

### **Divine jurisdictions and electoral constituencies**

Within their own territories, *devī-devtā* express their will on all private or public issues, including the choice of a candidate to regional elections. J. Singh (1989) shows that in nearby Kinnaur, the success of a political leader depends both upon his personal charisma and on the approval he receives from the local deity:

No discussion of politics in Kinnaur can ever be complete without a mention of ubiquitous *devi/devtas*. No politician can dare to publicly cross swords with a village deity. Candidates for elections begin their campaigns by presenting offerings to the local deity and by seeking his blessing. Should the *devta* express his wrath towards a particular candidate, the latter would have an uphill fight on his hands (Singh 1989: 37).

Most political leaders who stand for local elections belong to the region and have strong personal and devotional ties with village deities. A candidate who receives the approval of a local god will be more readily supported by the people living in the god's jurisdiction. In this sense, the *hār* can become an important factor in polls: the larger the *hār*, the more the deity's support can influence the results.

Some episodes that took place after Independence show how political leaders took into account these divine territories when reorganizing the electoral constituencies for the elections for the Himachal Pradesh Assembly in 1967. One example concerns the region of Banjar, 40 km south of Kullu. There the god Śṛṅgā Ṛṣi dominates a *koṭhi* (Banjar) next to the jurisdiction of the Balu Nāg deity, which covers a territory of about three *koṭhi* (Sikari, Tiloknath, and Fathepur). The worship of Balu Nāg is in the hands of an influential family. One of its members, Beli Ram, an influent political leader, wanted to be elected in a constituency that included the *koṭhi* of Śṛṅgā Ṛṣi. According to Beli Ram's son, the Congress Party, in power at the time, refused to give him the ticket and supported another local leader, nearer to this god. Beli Ram then decided to contest the election as an independent candidate. Since his influence in the subdivision controlled by Balu Nāg would have discredited the Congress candidate, the Congress party -he said- managed to prevent the constituency from

being cut in two, incorporating the territory of Balu Nāg within a reserved constituency (Ani) and thus eliminating any chance of Beli Ram winning the elections.

The importance of Śṛṅgā Ṛṣi's *hār* in the electoral results is still taken into account by contemporary political leaders. The elected representative of the corresponding constituency to the Legislative Assembly was up until recently Karan Singh, a brother of the Rājā of Kullu, both leaders of the Hindu right-wing party, the BJP.<sup>21</sup> According to a widespread opinion among Balu nāg's supporters, the Rājā, Mahesvar Singh, is today Śṛṅgā Ṛṣi's ally because he wants the inhabitants of the corresponding constituency to go on supporting his brother. According to them a manifestation of such an alliance takes place at the annual festival of Dashera, when all the *devī-devtā*'s palanquins are brought by their villagers to the capital to pay homage to Raghunāth and to his human representative, the Rājā. Since the latter was up until recently also a member of the New Delhi Parliament, and president of the festival committee,<sup>22</sup> Balu nāg's people accuse him of using his power to place Śṛṅgā Ṛṣi's palanquin in the highest place during the two main Dashera processions: immediately to the right of Raghunāth's ceremonial chariot . While they consider instead that their own god should have been given this honorific position by tradition, they accuse the king of interfering in the ritual rules with his electoral politics.

Śṛṅgā Ṛṣi and Balu Nāg are both 'landholding' deities (*muāfīdār devtā*), whose *hār* is sufficiently large to assume political weight, at least in regional elections. But even the so-called 'new' deities, devoid of property, and whose worship is recent, can assume an important role in this political-ritual system of alliances. This is the case, for instance, of goddess Pañcālī who is regularly gaining in importance since her current medium, a rather charismatic person, has been active now for about ten years. It is said that the goddess manifests herself with all her power (*śakti*) and many people come from far to consult her and ask for her protection. Mahesvar Singh shows a special predilection for this goddess as he thinks she has decisively supported his political career. One of the last episodes taken as proof was when the king was elected to Parliament, in 1998. An inhabitant of the village of Pañcālī recounted the episode to me:

The party of Raja [the BJP] was not in power at that time and the goddess [consulted by the raja 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 Hindu right came to power], and the Raja became a member of the Indian Parliament!

In order to thank the goddess, the king is said to have contributed to the building of a new temple for her. The consecration ceremony as described by the priest of Pañcālī shows how this goddess, lacking a traditional *hār*, has tried to extend her area of influence by taking advantage of the king's support:

On the day of the ceremony, the goddess, through her medium, gave an order to a messenger to go to the palace and to tell the king to come to the temple. During the celebrations, the raja started trembling [manifesting divine possession]. When they were setting up the statue of the goddess in the new temple, tears came to the Raja's eyes. There were thousands of people here and they all were scared of what the goddess might do. During the consecration ceremony, the goddess covered [in procession, with her palanquin] more than twenty villages. She was in a violent mood and asked for many sacrifices. [Her palanquin] went to all the nearby localities, to Balu Nāg's *hār*, Markhanda Ṛṣi's *hār*, and also to the village of Alva. There she set up her boundary. Nobody could stop her. Five kilometres away there is the village of Manglore and behind that, Tipri. Her procession made its way there. Thanks to the king and to the participation of all these villages, we offered a great sacrifice [with a lot of animals].

The procession thus enabled the goddess to declare the ambit of her influence in order to recruit new ‘supporters’ -as people in Kullu often say. Processions are frequent in this part of India for marking a deity's influence within a territory. In the nearby region of Tehri

Garhwal, for instance, pilgrimages carried out with the deity's palanquin through several administrative units 'represent and unite the territories in which they occur by circumambulating them' (Sax 1991: 204).<sup>23</sup>

The example of Pañcālī, as well as those described by Sax or by Emerson (reported previously) and concerning the colonial period, show that if the regional pantheon of these Himalayan regions appears 'almost always [to reproduce] some political-ceremonial areas... referring to a more or less distant royal past' (Toffin 1993: 100), they are nevertheless still likely to be re-defined and re-shaped on the basis of power relationships between villages or according to the vicissitudes of electoral politics.

Like the kings of the past, the political leaders of Kullu (and not only those belonging to royal families) create ties with the local territorial deities and establish alliances with them, thus provoking some transformations in the structure of the regional pantheon. What is significant is that Mahesvar Singh announced a proposal to assign all the sterile lands of Kullu to temple deities. Had it been accepted, such a gesture would have increased, albeit with sterile lands, the gods' holdings, offering 'new' deities the opportunity to become 'landowning' deities, and reinforcing the identification of Mahesvar Singh in his ritual role as a king, donor of land to deities for whom he demands respect and obedience.

## **Conclusion**

In his study on 'small kingdoms' in Orissa, Schnaepel (1994: 153) distinguishes two levels of political-territorial authority corresponding to two categories of deities, having different links with territories: one which is associated with local territories and with deities considered to be autochthonous; and the other covering the whole kingdom and with which deities introduced from the outside are associated.

We have seen that the contrast between these two levels of authorities is also present in Kullu. The god-king Raghunāth, whose worship was introduced from the plains by the king, does not have the same kind of relation with territory that local deities have within their jurisdiction. Raghunāth does not have a specific *hār*, and having neither medium nor palanquin he cannot be consulted directly by the inhabitants of his kingdom. The relationships



that villagers maintain with him are limited to royal festivals, when *devī-devtā*'s palanquins are brought to the capital to pay him homage. If he is the sovereign authority in the kingdom, over the people and the *devī-devtā*, he does not directly intervene in its prosperity or in the inhabitants' well-being.

By contrast, the *devī-devtā*'s relationship with their respective territory does not rely on the sole exercise of a sovereignty in their jurisdiction, but also involves the demonstration of the power (*śakti*) they have over land, the weather, and disease. We have seen god Goli Nāg lose his territory because he let rain pour down uncontrollably, and conversely goddess Pañcālī gained some territory thanks to the power she manifested in satisfying the demands of those who consult her.

Both the models show, however, how the territorial factor is a referent around which the social, political and religious life of the region is organized. Moreover, territory is not solely associated with political power, but is situated, according to Dumont, outside so-called 'ideology'. If 'ideology' is for Dumont 'a system of ideas and values' and includes 'the conscious aspects' of the social system (Dumont 1966), the material presented here shows that territory, far from being reducible to an 'empirical' dimension of the social organization, plays an important role in local discourse and is used as a theoretical and 'ideological' dimension framing social behaviour and religious and ritual activity.

Territory is not only linked to the political sovereignty of Raghunāth or of local gods, but is also taken as a referent for social identity and for the ritual solidarity of the inhabitants of the different *hār*. During village festivals, in which *hārye* of different deities participate, each villager identifies himself with his own 'god-palanquin', who thus becomes a referent not for defining his lineage or his caste, but for defining the place from where he comes or, more exactly, where he lives. As opposed to what Malamoud suggested in relation to the Vedic notion of *grāma*, 'village', here the referent for defining the *hār* is not 'the cohesion of the group which forms it', but rather the very area that constitutes it.

The importance of divine territoriality also explains the sustained political importance of village gods in the different systems of government that have historically succeeded one another in the region. Thanks to their mediums, their palanquins and the inhabitants of their

jurisdictions, local gods not only participate in local, political and religious life but, in the past as much as in the present, they establish close alliances with the central form of authority – the Rājā, the British administrators, and now political leaders. In this sense, the cults of *devī-devtā* show that territorial dimensions are not exclusively associated with the political domain of society but are at the very focus of the religious and ritual activities and discourses.

#### NOTES

1. For a discussion of these theories, cf. (among others) Galey (1989), Dirks (1996), Burghart (1987).
2. The main caste of the region is the Kanet, who now call themselves Rājput or Thākur. The Dāgī, of low status, are also numerically important. Brahmans are present but few in number, or concentrated over a few villages.
3. A change of residence does not necessarily sever the links of a deity with the original *hār*. For instance, village women used to marry outside their natal village and to go to live in the in-laws' village, because of the virilocal system of residence. During periods of hardship, a married woman tends to become closer to her natal village deity again. This deity, consulted through his/her medium, may say that he/she wants to be set up in the in-laws' house and be worshipped there. If this demand is accepted, the deity will settle in the in-laws' house not as a village deity, but as a family or house deity. This does not prevent the woman, once married, from being under the authority of her husband's lineage deity or of her husband's village deity (compare Sax 2000).
4. From that moment on, the official acts of the kingdom were issued in Raghunāth's name. The statue of this god, which according to local stories comes from Ayodhya, is still worshipped by the descendants of the royal family. Four or five priests are in charge of daily worship. They wake the god and his consort, wash them, apply their make up, dress them in royal robes, worship them and seat them on a throne so that visitors to the temple may receive their *darśan* (vision).
5. Vidal (1988: 56) reports how the ruler of Bashar assigned five villages to a deity of the Rohru district to thank him for having brought rain.

6. In Orissa, Kulke (1986: 154) notes that by giving land to gods the Oriya kings wanted to have ‘a nominal leadership among the Hindu rajas of east and south India’. According to him ‘In order to justify this claim and to strengthen his power, both inside and outside of Orissa, he declared the Lord of Puri the Supreme King of his empire’. Reference to this kind of gift is also found in the dynastic stories of Himalayan kingdoms near Kullu: for the district of Kinnaur, for example, Singh (1989: 88) writes that no act of the state ‘was performed without the approval of Bhima Kami, who was regarded as the ruler of the land’. Land gifts to gods are also attested in southern India (Waghorne 1989: 405).
7. This idea of Dumont has been adopted by some historians (cf. Wink 1986) and taken for granted by other scholars (for example: ‘in the Indian political tradition, such as it appears for instance in the Arthashastra, territory has an ambiguous and subordinate place’, Jaffrelot 1996: 75).
8. Coldstream was responsible for revising the system of land taxation in 1910. The manuscript can be found in the Land Office in Kullu.
9. In various parts of India, village temple deities have land registered in their name. Sontheimer (1964) shows that god as landowner has been the topic of a longstanding discussion, not only among jurists but also among philosophers and theologians who linked this to the debate on the nature of the idol -whether or not it could be considered as the deity's body, endowed with intelligence and sensory organs. Sontheimer shows the difference between positions defended by jurists and by materialistic philosophers, for whom the land was given to a god only in a figurative and metaphoric sense (thus implying that the priest was the real beneficiary), and the popular belief also shared by theistic philosophers, for whom the god was the real owner. This idea, according to the author, was somewhat reified when British administrators in the nineteenth century surveyed the lands of village gods -even if the notion of god was then reduced to an abstract juridical, purely ideal entity. Also Annoussamy (1979), Derrett (1968), and Colas in this volume.
10. In this kind of situation British administrators often considered the god as the subject, thus adopting the local point of view. In some cases I will respect this usage.

11. Vidal analyses some stories collected by Emerson, which illustrate how a deity could try to impose himself on another deity's territory, and the hostility that this could provoke between the two gods' respective supporters (Vidal 1988: 64ff). In some cases, the territories for which the gods were competing seem to correspond to those of rival political groups (quoted in Vidal 1988: 55).
12. Nevertheless, temple functionaries, even after officially becoming owners of the temple lands they cultivated, usually continue to offer their services to the temple for fear of provoking the deity's anger. Cf. Vidal (1988) and Berti (2001).
13. They coexist with the panchayat divisions which roughly coincide with the *phātī*. While *phātī* and *koṭhi* are still referred to by the land administration, it is the panchayat that are otherwise referred to for most other administrative and political purposes.
14. A parallel to these subdivisions can be found in Kinnaur where, instead of *koṭhi* or *phātī*, the terms used are *khund* and *ghori* (Raha 1978 : 95).
15. The ritual is decided by the deity and may consist in the sacrifice of an animal or in a Brahmanic ritual of vegetable oblations in a sacred fire.
16. For a detailed analysis of this conflict, see Berti (2001: chap. X).
17. It is the god Indra, one of the gods of the classical Indian pantheon. In local myths this god gives rain to the god Takṣak Nāg, implicated in the conflict. The association with Samundra, the primordial ocean, emphasises the capacity to give rain.
18. It means that the brothers Phāl Nāg and Takṣak Nāg sleep in the same bed side by side -i. e. they are very close.
19. The opposite hypothesis seems improbable, since the joint ritual responsibility is applied at all levels of worship units (village, *phātī*, *koṭhi*) and for a number of different situations – not only in times of conflict but also for all kinds of ritual work (work to build or repair the temple or the god's images, etc.).
20. We know that the system, at least in theory, has also been used elsewhere in India since medieval times, as well as in some regions of Nepal (Regmi 1978: 142).
21. Even if British administrators have withdrawn the title of *rājā* from the kings of Kullu, this decision did not have any effect from a ritual point of view: they keep intact their role vis-à-

vis the local deities as Raghunāth's first devotee and representative. They continue to live in the Kullu palace and to finance worship of Raghunāth. Thus, though Mahesvar Singh, the actual Rājā, has neither power as Rājā nor any official title, he still continues to be called 'Rājā' by the local people. It is in this sense that the term Rājā is used here when referring to him.

22. Since the 1970s, the annual festival in honour of Raghunāth has become a 'National Festival' and is partly financed by the state of Himachal Pradesh. Consequently a Festival Committee has been created, whose President changes according to the party in power. When the Rājā was a Member of Parliament, he assumed two roles during the celebrations: a ritual one as delegate of Raghunāth, and a political one as MP and President of the Festival Committee. He alone takes decisions concerning the relative positions to be attributed to the deities' palanquins. The distribution of these positions is crucial in defining the hierarchical relations between villages, and plays an essential role in the alliances between political leaders and groups of villagers (Berti 2005).

23. On palanquin processions in the Katmandu Valley see Toffin (1982).

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