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## CHAPTER 4

### **Kings, Gods, and Political Leaders in Kullu (Himachal Pradesh)<sup>1</sup>**

*Daniela Berti*

The historian Pamela Price remarked that political authority was shared in Indian kingdoms not only by the king and local chiefs, but also with deities who "amidst their various identities, were royal and 'ruled' their devoted human subjects from temples" (1989: 562). Numerous studies on South-Asian regional models of royalty have been dedicated to this sharing of power between a king and the gods in his kingdom. Nevertheless what is not always explicitly clarified is how a god can physically "rule" over those who are considered to be his political subjects and how he can exercise any political power with (or in competition with) the king. This chapter will develop this question by taking into account a contemporary political context where actors, while sharing democratic and "secularist" slogans, still resort to pre-colonial and regional forms of politico-religious power. The focus will thus be less on the model of kingship itself than on how this model is enacted in a contemporary context, by people making their own choices and decisions, playing ambiguous roles at times and interacting with each other on different registers.

The setting for these observations will be the territory of a former kingdom, Kullu, which nowadays gives its name to a district of Himachal Pradesh. Here, Mahesvar Singh, the descendant of the royal family, is involved in electoral politics as member of the Hindu right-wing party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). From 1998 to 2004 he was an elected Member of the Delhi Parliament.<sup>2</sup> This political role often merges with his role as Raja (*rājā*), still relevant at a ritual level, as he maintains strong ties with local gods through their different human representatives. These relationships, which were once associated with kingship, have been incorporated and transformed within the political system of contemporary India.

My observations will focus on royal festivals. In former times, these were occasions when royal power was ritually and publicly celebrated, transmitted and transformed. The king displayed and reaffirmed his religious role of protector of the *dharma* (socio-cosmic order), as well as the relations he had with regional gods. Royal festivals were thus a privileged framework where politics were strictly combined with ritual and religious activity. With the end of the kingdoms, these ritual contexts, far from being abandoned, have been integrated and reinterpreted by the new democratic state. Since the 1960s or 1970s (depending on the region), most royal festivals have become National Festivals, patronized by the state's local representatives who occasionally try to appropriate for themselves symbols of ancient royal power in the public ritual space. An example given by Peabody (1997) concerns the celebration of the Ramlila, an open-air pageant play celebrating the victory of the god-hero Rama, the king of Ayodhya, over his enemy Ravana. During the 1986 Ramlila celebrated in

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Mahesvar Singh for allowing me to follow the case analysed in this chapter. A special thank goes also to Kedari, M. R. Thakur, B. Thakur and Chambial for the hours they spent replying to my questions.

<sup>2</sup> In the 2004 elections Mahesvar Singh was defeated by a member of another royal family, Rani Pratibha Singh, the wife of the current Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, Virbhadra Singh, who is the descendant of the Bushahar royal family, a kingdom nowadays included in Shimla district.

the town of Kota (the capital of a former kingdom in Rajasthan), an elected member of the State Government from the Congress Party whose constituency included Kota, came to the festival dressed up as Rama. He was not alone, since the local Raja who was claiming to detain this right was, also, similarly dressed as the god.<sup>3</sup>

Another way for the post-colonial politicians to exploit the kings' ritual role on the new political scene has been to put Rajas up for elections in the constituencies covering their former kingdoms. As J. Pouchepadass stresses:

"The British tutelage had drastically reduced their powers, but not their legitimacy. Their divine ancestry was still proclaimed, and in the eyes of their people they remained the protectors of everyone's *dharma*. ... Thus, stripped of any control over their territories (already quite curtailed for several years), they nevertheless remained kings—at least symbolically—for the people. Entering politics under the new sovereign, the democratic State, which reinstated them somewhat in a constituency, was like a natural opening for them." (Pouchepadass, 1988: XXIII)<sup>4</sup>

By involving the state in royal festivals, and kings in electoral politics, post-independence political leaders have implicitly created the conditions for keeping alive pre-colonial politico-religious roles and relationships in the contemporary democracy.<sup>5</sup> I will study this process by analysing the complex overlap of two systems in people's discourses and behaviour: one still embedded in values and models of interactions pertaining to royalty, the other emerging from the "secular" politics of the democratic state.<sup>6</sup> I will focus on a long-standing conflict between different groups of villagers, who quarrelled over assuring their respective god a right of precedence during the festival. The arguments and the multiple interpretations of this conflict, as exposed by its different protagonists (king, gods' mediums, villagers and politicians), will show the multiplicity of registers used to construct and legitimize both divine and political authority. Before going into the case, I will present a historical background of the ritual and political relations that Mahesvar Singh's ancestors had established with these regional gods in the past, and how these relations have been transformed in the contemporary political context.

## I

### **Ruling on behalf of the gods**

The gods' sovereignty takes on two specific and distinctive meanings in the region of Kullu. One is exercised by village gods, who are considered to rule over encapsulated territories, the largest of which include the territories of subordinate gods. A village god is perceived as king over his territory and receives regular tribute (*nazarānā*) from those who live within his

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<sup>3</sup> See also Price (1989, 1996) and Balzani (2003).

<sup>4</sup> The kings seemed to have been aware of it, as is shown by the proposal made by the Raja of Benares to Christiane Hurtig (1988: 9): "Even in government, the princes have always had only the illusion of being rulers. Come to see me during the festival of Dusserah, you will understand to what the real popularity of princes is due".

<sup>5</sup> The choice of presenting Rajas on the electoral list is not limited to Hindu right-wing parties. If at the beginning, Congress had forbidden Rajas on their lists, by 1957 it "offers itself its investiture to many princes who were still very popular and influential" (Hurtig 1988: 66). See also Jaffrelot (1993) and Sundar (2001).

<sup>6</sup> As Brass (1999) points out by referring to article 30 of the Constitution, the principle of separating the State and religion is more in terms of the State's respect of all religions rather than of a real "wall of separation" doctrine that prohibits the State from financing religious educational institutions. However, the protagonists of the conflict which will be analysed in the next pages use the term "secularist" (in English) in a context where they denounce the interference of electoral politics in religious matters saying, for example, that this should not exist in a 'secularist country' like India.

jurisdiction. He exercises his sovereignty through a set of various representatives. Firstly, he can be consulted directly by speaking through his own institutional medium, the Gur (*gur*). A Gur can belong to any caste and is considered to be the god's receptacle when occasionally possessed by means of ritual procedures. During consultations a dialogue is held between the god and the villagers who ask him to interpret their problems or to give advice on some decision to be taken. Secondly, a god is officially represented by his administrator, the *kārdār*, who manages his land properties and the practical organisation of his ritual. The administrator acts together with the *deurī*, the members of the temple committee. They are high-caste people, Brahmans, Rajput or Thakur.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, gods have their own palanquin, a wooden structure decorated with metal faces and coloured cloths. The palanquin, like the medium, is considered to be the god's receptacle, and its movements are said to be directed by the god himself and not by its bearers – who are in most cases high-caste villagers. Yet a further way for the god to express his will is by manifesting himself through ordinary people in his jurisdiction. For example, during ceremonies, any villager can suddenly start to tremble and to speak in the name of the god.

The royal authority that a god exercises at local level is thus distributed and fragmented among many people who, in different ways, act in his name. The way in which each of these gods' representatives contributes to the local political and religious activity varies from village to village, according to personal power and charisma.

A second model of divine suzerainty is associated with the god Raghunath, another name for the god Rama.<sup>8</sup> In Kullu dynastic chronicles as well as in local stories, the statue of this god is said to have been introduced from Ayodhya during the 17<sup>th</sup> century by King Jagat Singh of Kullu. The kingdom of Kullu was then transferred to Raghunath. From that time onwards the Kullu kings considered themselves as mere "servants" of Raghunath, and officially ruled on his behalf. The widespread story narrating this episode underlines its religious aspects.

"King Jagat Singh, having caused a Brahman to commit suicide is affected by these symptoms: whatever he eats is full of worms and whatever he sees is full of blood. He consults a Baba [*bābā*, ascetic] who advises him to bring to the palace the statue of god Rama situated in a temple of the plains, to offer him his kingdom and to rule as god's governor. The Baba is sent by the king to the temple where, thanks to his power to become invisible, he steals the statue and brings it back to Kullu. There, the king offers the throne to the god and declares himself as his delegate and first servant." (Kamla Kishori Sharma, the king's family priest)

The Baba who, in the story, is presented as responsible for the introduction of the god, is a certain Damodar Das, said to be a disciple of Krishnadas Payahari, an ascetic devoted to Rama who spread the worship of god Rama to many regions in the Himalayan hills.<sup>9</sup> In Kullu,

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<sup>7</sup> In the British Gazetteers the most numerous caste is that of the Kanet who are defined as agriculturists, Lyall (1874: 150). Nowadays the term Kanet is not used by local people who define themselves as Rajput or Thakur. The Kangra district gazetteers of 1917 (Vashishtha 2003: 54) read: "The Kanets are divided into two great tribes, the Khasia and the Rao or Rahu ...".

<sup>8</sup> Rama incarnates the figure of the ideal king, defender of the socio-cosmic order. He has also become a god of salvation and devotion and a central figure in many sects. It is to this god that the kings of various regions of India (see Kulke 1996: 154 about Orissa, Singh 1989: 87 about Kinnaur and Waghorne 1989: 405 about South India) have, at different periods, dedicated their kingdom, by presenting themselves as their first devotee.

<sup>9</sup> See Goswamy (1968) and Clémentin-Ojha (1999).

Krishnadas Pahyari, named Pyari Baba, is represented inside the royal palace by his coat and sandals, and is still honoured by the members of the royal family.

Although the introduction of Raghunath corresponds to a project of religious proselytism, it also proposes a model of legitimation of royal power. Since this transfer, all the Kullu kings have ruled on behalf of this god, as testified by two royal documents from king Jagat Singh and from king Pritam Singh's time respectively. Kubram, a *tankri*<sup>10</sup> translator, gave me the following documents taken from the originals kept in the Shimla museum. They show that public acts proclaimed by king Jagat Singh were from then on signed in common with the god.

"Aum Supreme King of the Kings Sri Ram Chandra [Raghunath], and Jagat Singh who is his servant (*gulāmī*) ..."

"Aum Supreme Kings of Kings, Dasharatha's son, Sri Rama Chandra and King Pritam Singh who made his service duty (*gulām*) to Raghunath ...."

Parallel to this transfer of royal authority, the Kullu kings also assigned land to some village gods, who thus became land-holding gods (*muāfidār devtā*), (Hutchinson & Vogel 1933). The British administrator, Coldstream, who was in charge of the region at the beginning of the 20th century, explains the division of royal land between Raghunath and village deities.

"The god Raghunath is the most important of the Kulu deotas. It is said that King Jagat Singh, who procured the idol from Ajudhya [sic], endowed it with a third of the revenue of Kulu. The remaining two thirds were assigned to local idols [village gods] and to Brahmins and pious mendicants who had to pay the tribute [*nazarana*] to Raghunath." (Coldstream 1913)<sup>11</sup>

All these land-holding gods were supposed to recognise royal authority by paying annual tribute to Raghunath and by going to the capital once a year, with their palanquins, villagers and temple functionaries, to pay homage to Raghunath and to his human delegate, the king of Kullu. Gods who were not present at the festival were to pay a fine to the king. Even today, on the penultimate day of the festival (the Mohalla day), all village deities must present themselves to the king inside his royal tent, on the festival grounds... although no fee has to be paid if one is absent.<sup>12</sup>

A Kullu lawyer, B. Thakur, told me the story of the introduction of Raghunath and of the submission of the village deities to this outsider god, and explained what was, according to him, its political dimension:

"The story of Raghunath... I don't believe in it...how can I believe that the cause of all this is due to the fact that the king was responsible for a Brahman's death! Kings used to kill so many people...what else should happen to him if he killed a Brahman?... In fact, the real problem of the king at this period was that villagers

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<sup>10</sup> *Tankri* is the script previously used for official records in some Himalayan kingdoms.

<sup>11</sup> On land donations to village gods in Kullu, see also Diack (1897).

<sup>12</sup> Registers in Urdu of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century indicate the quantity of land owned by the gods, as well as the amount of the tribute that each of them was to pay to Raghunath in recognition of his sovereignty. These registers are kept in the Kullu Land Revenue Office.

accepted nothing but the decisions taken by village gods and their mediums and the royal political power was always felt by them as imposed upon them from outside. For any decision, what village gods said was final. I think, thus, that the king was having some problems, and so he decided to bring Raghunath to Kullu. Afterwards, he ordered all village gods to come here during Dashera. He gave the power to village gods by giving them land and he forced all of them to come here."

The introduction of the worship of Raghunath may be considered, according to this interpretation, as a politico-religious form of tutelage by which the prerogatives that local deities were already enjoying inside their respective territories, had to be sanctioned by the palace.<sup>13</sup> At the origin of such alliances was the king's awareness of the political influence exercised by village gods on the local population, more disposed—as B. Thakur said—to following the gods' instructions than orders from the palace.

The relations between the central authority exercised by the king on behalf of Raghunath, and the local powers exercised by villagers on behalf of village gods and goddesses, seem to have always been complex and ambiguous. In the nearby kingdom of Kinnaur, Singh (1989) observed that the control over local deities was crucial for the king in order to exercise and maintain effective power over the kingdom's whole territory.

"[The Kings] used the devtas [village gods] as their representatives for manifesting royal presence in remote areas ... Since the King did not often visit Kinnaur, the devta's frequent tours on his behalf manifested divine sanction for the King's rule." (Singh 1989: 89)

Nevertheless, as the author himself pointed out, village gods, through their mediums, could also be used by villagers to express disapproval towards the king:

"the village deity represented, in a way, the collective will of the village against the unchecked absolutism of the King who moulded the devtas' pre-eminence to his own purposes." (Singh 1989: 89)

In another nearby kingdom, that of Mandi, we know from Emerson's work (1910) that the king controlled village rituals by interfering in the nomination of temple administrators, of the god's mediums, or in the construction of the god's palanquins.<sup>14</sup> In Kullu, stories tell how the king could also exercise "pressure" on village gods and on the powers (*śakti*) they were

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<sup>13</sup> The need for alliances with deities seems to have been a crucial element in the exercise of political power in all the Himalayan kingdoms. By analysing documents from Nepal, Burghart (1987) has shown how royal gifts of land to gods was one way for kings to establish personal alliances with them in order to obtain victory for themselves and prosperity for the kingdom.

<sup>14</sup> Emerson, who was administrator in Shimla at the beginning of the 20th century, gives some details about the prerogatives of the king to control any changes regarding gods' worship: "... a new festival cannot be instituted without his [Raja's] permission, nor a god, who has previously been without a *rath* or litter, be given one without special sanction. A few years ago, the subjects of a village deity wished to change the shape of his idol, from the pyramidal form, popular in some parts of the State, to the form with the large circular canopy favoured by his immediate neighbours; but before they could do so, the Raja's approval had to be obtained. Ordinarily, the Raja does not interfere in the appointment of the god's diviner, but his right to do so is recognised, and for the more important gods it is exercised. This is especially the case where the office of diviner is hereditary in a number of families and changes are accordingly numerous. Each change of office has to be reported for his sanction. Similarly, when the office is hereditary and the family dies out the Raja's orders must be obtained regarding the selection of a household from which future candidates are to be taken." (Emerson 1910: 68)

considered to have over rain or sunshine within specific territories. In times of drought, for instance, he used to organise a "universal consultation" (*jagtī pūch*) by ordering all the village gods' mediums to come to his palace, in order to ask the deities to give rain. It is said that, when the request was not satisfied, the king considered the mediums responsible for the gods' failure. He would threaten to cut off their head if rain did not fall at once. We will see how similar consultations are still organised by the present king of Kullu.<sup>15</sup>

Even after the region was annexed by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the ongoing worship of Raghunath has been a constant preoccupation for the descendants of Jagat Singh. For instance, Men Singh (1892-1921) received a paid assignation of 338 Rupees from the British in order to assure the continuity of the services owed to the god. Coldstream (1913) refers to a petition in which the king complained that this amount was not sufficient. During Coldstream's period, the king also received the tribute (*nazarānā*) that village deities owed to Raghunath and which amounted to 545 Rupees (*ibid.*).

The fact that the British administration did not intervene in the economic and political aspects of deities' ceremonies, and even officially recognised the deities' land properties, probably left almost intact the relations between village gods and Raghunath.<sup>16</sup> Even if the king had lost his kingdom he continued to celebrate the Dashera festival and village gods continued to be brought to the capital once a year to pay their annual homage (Lyall, 1869). It is possible, of course, as the British administrators suggest in their gazetteers, that participation in Dashera dropped during the colonial period, as the king no longer had power to oblige village gods to come.

What stands out from this brief account of the pre-independence period is a form of political power which "passes through" the gods, in two different ways. At village level, it passes through the authority of village deities, an authority which seems to be fragmented locally among various representatives at different levels of society – gods' medium, the temple administrator, the temple committee, and ordinary high- and low-caste villagers. On a central level, the transfer of the kingdom to Raghunath may be interpreted as a way for the king to centralise all these fragmented local powers by introducing an authority from the outside.

### **Royal roles in new electoral politics**

Similarly to what happened in other parts of India, the history of post-independence Kullu shows how the political leaders who did not belong to the royal family repeatedly tried to

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<sup>15</sup> This consultation usually takes place in Nagar, one of the former royal capitals. Near the temple situated inside the Nagar palace, a panel recalls the practice of *jagtī pūch*: "Even now during the great hour of natural calamities, other miseries and to decide matters of importance with regards to god and goddesses all the representatives of god and goddess... assembled at this holy place. Head of the Kullu raj family with the order of devi-devta organize the function with traditional reverence... all the gurs who are present at the occasion express the view of their devta after going into trans (sic)" See also Vidal (1988: 237).

<sup>16</sup> The king could occasionally "use" village gods to counter the British Administration. Singh notes, for instance, how the king of Kinnaur contested a decision of the administrator concerning the new system of revenue collection by presenting his opposition as the request of an unhappy god: "[the king] justified [his request] by saying that the principal god of the country had expressed an opinion that cholera which was then raging was solely attributable to the monetary assessment... He played upon his subject's religious beliefs to make them totally opposed to a monetary assessment since the devta favoured a return to the old system" (Singh 1989: 106). See also Sax (1991). In the districts directly governed by the British administrator, the latter could also be requested to assume some of the roles the king had vis-à-vis the temple's functionaries. Emerson, who was administrating the neighbouring region of Shimla, reports in a quite humoristic style how he was called upon to react to the demand of some villagers who came to his office one day to request him to punish the mediums of a powerful deity of the region, Kamru nag, considered responsible for not having brought rain. (Emerson, manuscript)

appropriate for themselves the public space of the royal festivals. One way to do that was by transforming Dasherā into a National Festival. According to my informants, this transformation took place at a period when participation in the festival was reduced as a consequence of land reforms that gave the opportunity for tenants (including temple tenants) to become land-owners. Many rich village gods were thus reduced to poverty and their villagers were no longer motivated to go to the capital and face the expense of a six-day stay.

By the 1960s, Lal Chand Prarthi, one of the main Congress Party regional leaders, then a member of the local legislative assembly and a minister in local government, asked for some funds from the then Punjab government, which included Kullu at that time, to finance a programme of folk dances during the Dasherā festival. His explicit aim was to reinvigorate the festival which he considered to be "the most important cultural heritage of the valley" (Prarthi 1973). The funds were granted and increased each year. After some years, Lal Chand Prarthi not only financed the folk dance programme, but also "invited some gods" by promising their villagers that they would be reimbursed for the expenses. A Kullu erudite, M.R. Thakur, remembers this period:

"First he [Lal Chand Prarthi] invited the dance groups in order to attract the public. When the grants increased, gods also started to come [with their palanquins], and they [the Panjab government] reimbursed them ... Last year [1999], 175 gods came to Dasherā and the government gave 5 lakhs of rupees [500 000 rupees] to villagers."

With the state patronage, the Kullu Dasherā became classified as "National Folk Dance Festival". A committee was created whose president was a representative of the government.<sup>17</sup> In 1973, with the participation of a Romanian group in the dance programmes, the Kullu Dasherā was classified as an "International Folk Dance Festival". A whole political, administrative and economic organisation progressively gained importance and started to mobilise different protagonists – the Deputy Commissioner, the police, public officers, intellectuals, political leaders along with villagers and their gods.<sup>18</sup>

The end of the kingdom and the "nationalisation" of the festival had transformed the relations between village deities and central power (or nowadays the state). Whereas deities were formerly obliged to come to the festival and to pay tribute to the king-god, they now receive money (designated by the same term, *nazarānā*) from the state for coming to the capital with their villagers.<sup>19</sup> Bringing their deities to the festival is no longer an obligation for their villagers, but a privilege. Each group of devotees does its best so that its deity gets money and honours from the administration, offerings from devotees, and visits from the other participants in the festival. All these things are important for the deity's prestige, and can increase his fame and power.

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<sup>17</sup> From 1998 to 2003, the president of the Dasherā Committee was Mahesvar Singh, since he was MP for the Mandi constituency. His younger brother, Karan Singh (who was at that time MLA in Banjar, one of the three Kullu constituencies), could have become the committee president but instead he left his place to his elder brother. In 2004, when Mahesvar Singh lost the general elections, the presidency went to Rajkrishna Gaur, MLA of the Kullu Constituency.

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the transformation of the Kullu Dasherā festival, see Berti (2006).

<sup>19</sup> The funds are nowadays given by the Department of Language which also finances other Himachal Pradesh national and district festivals. The Department gives the money to the Deputy Commissioner, who is one of the chairmen of the Dasherā Committee. Part of the money is given to village deities as such, and the amount is decided on by this committee according to three different criteria: 1. Old prestige of devta and glory; 2. The distance of the devta from his place of residence to Kullu and back; 3. The number of people coming with the god. The amount of money distributed to each deity is recorded on two official lists compiled by the civil service, that of the "*muāfidār devtā*" (gods holding land property) and that of the "*naī devtā*".

Even though it is the Dashera Committee which finances the people and deities' trips to the capital as well as the dance programmes, the king continues to be the main protagonist of the religious ceremonies.<sup>20</sup> He also maintains a link to all village deities in relation to whom he is still considered a real king. The role he thus held during Dashera disturbed the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) Lal Chand Prarthi who, himself having the control of an important village goddess, knew perfectly well how important it was for a politician to extend influence to village deities. A school teacher in Kullu, Chambial, recalls that period:

"Lal Chand Prarthi did not tolerate that people were giving more importance to the king than to ministers and the MLA. The king's dynasty was over but the people here continued their devotion to, and respect for the king today. Lal Chand Prarthi did not want the king to sit in a palanquin, receive all the village gods, and have processions carried out in the royal palanquin every day during Dashera ... . He said that India was an independent state and a king has no right to maintain the festival. He is no longer head of this. Then politics is involved ... Lal Chand Prarthi wanted to give political colour to Dashera because the main deity Raghunath was in the king's possession. He said: 'you cannot sit in the royal palanquin'; and the king said 'this is tradition, I am the chief worker of Raghunath and I must keep his rituals intact.'"

The schoolteacher remembers many episodes which opposed the Congress MLA and the then king of Kullu, Mahendar Singh. For instance, in 1972, Lal Chand Prarthi wanted to perform Dashera on his own, without the king's presence. He brought Raghunath's chariot to the festival ground without putting the god inside, since his statue was in the king's possession. Just four or five gods participated in this procession of the "empty" chariot, during which – as Chambial remembers – Lal Chand Prarthi himself was possessed. While trembling (a sign of possession), Lal Chand Prarthi said he was *āṭhāra kardū*, a group of local gods.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of Prarthi's efforts the king succeeded in preserving the ritual control over the Dashera festival. Lal Chand Prarthi and other Congress Party politicians who took control of the Dashera Committee after him, had to accept to limiting their presence and influence on the festival to the dance programs only, and to leave the ritual phases to the king. A separation was thus progressively created between the "ritual scene" of the Dashera, whose protagonists were the members of the royal family, and the "folk dance scene". Here Congress Party politicians, in their role as local representatives of the state, also had control over the Dashera Committee. In that role they also took part in the festival as cultural benefactors, and they could use the festival as a public place for their political propaganda.

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<sup>20</sup> Contrary to what happened, for instance, in the neighbouring ex-kingdom of Mandi where King Jogender Sen, who was a diplomat and gave the royal temple to the State, Kullu kings never gave up the temple of Raghunath. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the temple has been recognised as the king's private property. The little statue of Raghunath is established in the royal temple adjacent to the palace, where it can be honoured by devotees - who are usually people from the town. Twelve persons assure the daily service of the little metal statue: the god-king is awakened, washed, dressed, honoured, nourished and, at night, put to bed. During the day he sits on the throne with his wife Sita on the left and, in front of him, the monkey-god Hanuman. The worship, which is celebrated by a lineage of royal priests who claim to come from Bengal, differs from the cult of village gods.

<sup>21</sup> The expression, literally meaning eighteen baskets, refers to the story of a ṛishi who came from Kailash, carrying eighteen images of gods in a basket. When he reached the village of Malana, a demon blew and all the images flew away. They landed at different places where they are worshipped. Those gods are said to have multiplied and from 18 they would now be 18 "crores" or 180 million (Thakur 1997: 48). Therefore the expression sometimes refers to the total number of Kullu gods.

The reunification of the religious and political scene of Dashera took place with the present descendant of the Kullu royal family, Mahesvar Singh. In addition to being a fervent devotee of the local gods and a defender of what he considers to be local tradition, in 1976 Mahesvar Singh started a political career in the Hindu right-wing Party (at that time the Jan Sangh, now BJP). After having been a MLA, in 1998 he was elected Member of Parliament for the Mandi constituency, which includes the territory of the ancient Kullu kingdom.<sup>22</sup> In 2000 and 2001, when the conflict I will now analyse occurred, Mahesvar Singh thus had two different roles: ritually, he was king – and I will use here the term in that sense; politically he was a Member of Parliament (MP), and in this role, he was also the president of the Dashera committee.<sup>23</sup>

The case concerns, as mentioned before, a long-standing conflict between different groups of villagers who quarrelled over ensuring the honorific rights of their respective god during the Dashera festival.

## II

### **On the right of Raghunath: divine honours and political history**

One specificity of the Kullu Dashera, when compared with the royal ceremonies performed in other regions of India, is that here the distribution of honours, which are elsewhere distributed by the king to human dignitaries, concerns village deities.<sup>24</sup> Dashera is in fact the main occasion for local deities to be brought to the capital by their villagers in order to pay their annual homage to Raghunath and to his human delegate, Mahesvar Singh. Each deity comes represented by his medium and by his palanquin (whose movements, we have seen, are supposed to be directed by the deity himself and to express his will, his feelings). The deities are thus the very protagonists of the festival. The privileges are distributed among these palanquins and villagers enter into conflict to get a honorific place for their god.

The honorific positions and roles held by these palanquin-gods during Dashera are crucial for villagers since they visualise and make public (within the space of the festival) their gods' importance in the local pantheon. Honours and privileges are multiple: to enter the throne hall, to exchange gifts with the king and his family, to accompany the king during his daily procession, and so forth. Some honours are the unquestionable prerogative of specific deities; others are the object of virulent competition and protests.

The most contested of all these precedence rights is conferred during the procession, *rath yātrā*, on the first day of Dashera. In this *yātrā*, the Raghunath's chariot, in which the god has been placed, is pulled over several hundred metres by the crowd of devotees. Village deities participate with their palanquins carried by their villagers and they are disposed in

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<sup>22</sup> He seemed to be the ideal candidate: in Kullu he was "the Raja" and in the nearby district of Mandi, his sister got married to the present "Raja" of the ancient homonymous kingdom. In 1998, when the BJP coalition won the central elections, he was elected and became MP. Mahesvar Singh's brother, Karan Singh, is also a BJP leader and was an elected member of the MLA for the Banjar constituency in the lower Kullu valley.

<sup>23</sup> The president of the committee is always a politician in power, usually an MLA, but with Mahesvar Singh being the Raja he himself became president.

<sup>24</sup> The notions of honour, rank, and precedence have often been presented by historians of India as crucial elements in the exercise of royal power, which have persisted and even developed after the end of the kingdom, in the political systems of the colonial and post-colonial period. As Cohn (1987: 169) wrote in his study on the representation of royal authority in Victorian India, the spatial order of these royal ceremonies "fixed, created and represented relationships with the ruler. The closer to the person of the ruler or his representative one stood, the higher one's status". Honours and privileges were never absolutely given and royal ceremonies "served as a forum for revealing changes in status which may, however, be contested" (Balzani 2003: 82) See Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam (1992), Zins (1995) Pouchepadass (1988) Haynes (1990), Schnepel (1996).

relation to the royal chariot according to different criteria. For example, the geographical origin of a deity determines if his palanquin walks on the left or on the right side of the chariot. The spatial closeness of a palanquin-god to the chariot is also a mark of his closeness to the royal god and consequently of his importance in the regional pantheon.

The position of the different deities on the left side of Raghunath's chariot (the side of the deities from the High Valley) is almost predefined. But there has been a long-standing dispute about the position to the immediate right of Raghunath's chariot, which is called the *dhur* position. This honorific place has a long, complex and contested history involving different groups of villagers whose rivalry has changed in nature over the course of time. I will mostly focus on the form this conflict assumed between 1999 and 2001, when I started to follow the case, but I will report on the manner that people interpreted the rivalry in relation to a previous political context.

Let us first have a look at some salient facts.

During the 1999 Dashera the *dhur* was attributed by the king to Shringa Rishi, a god from the Banjar region. The supporters of the god Balu Nag, from the same region, protested. At the very moment of the procession they tried to defend what they considered to be their rights and obtained the place for their own god by pushing the other god's palanquin amidst the crowd (saying that they were themselves pushed by the god). The fight between the two groups called for police intervention.

During Dashera in 2000, Balu Nag did not come to the festival. The rumour was that the Raja did not even send him an invitation.<sup>25</sup> The procession started and Triyugi Narayan, another god implicated in the conflict, tried to snatch the *dhur* from Shringa Rishi. Prevented from doing so by the police, he became angry and – so his supporters said – forced the men carrying his palanquin to leave the procession.

The conflict started to create a scandal in the newspapers. An article from the Panjab newspaper, *Umar Ujala*, written by its local correspondent, Gopali Sharma, reports and comments on the events:

"In the Kullu Dashera, ... the rules of this ancient tradition linked to *devi-devta* [village gods] have been broken one after another ... The deities' functionaries who know this ancient tradition have tried to preserve it. But for political and administrative reasons, they cannot ... The problem is becoming more and more complicated. A meeting was held some days before ... [where it was] decided that if the king and the administration do not find a solution, no god would come to Dashera anymore. ... People say that the places of gods and goddesses during the procession of Raghunath, have to be chosen according to *śāstra* [sacred texts] and tradition, so that in the future this Raghunath procession, so popular in the whole world, will maintain solemnity and respect." (*Umar Ujala*, October 14<sup>th</sup> 2000, Chandigarh)

The concept of "tradition" evoked in the article is important here to understand a first dimension of the arguments used by the different groups in order to defend their rights in the dispute. "Tradition" refers to two different representations of the royal past which the conflicting parties chose to draw upon, in order to defend their god's superiority, and which were respectively defined as the "local tradition" and "*śāstra* tradition". "Local tradition" refers to the local stories, which report the different forms of alliance that the kings of Kullu have established over the course of time with local gods. But this local repertory is often overlapped by another one, narrated in the pan-Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

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<sup>25</sup> Each deity receives an invitation card by the Dashera Committee by which they are informed of the day the celebrations start and other details concerning the festival programme.

Indeed, local gods are often identified with one figure of these epics, giving them a sort of second identity.<sup>26</sup>

These two repertoires are constantly referred to and create a double and intermixing criterion to establish the honorific positions that village gods have during the festival. This double model of legitimisation may be linked to the fact that the kingship in Kullu is, so to speak, double – there is the king-god Raghunath (i.e. Rama) whose story is narrated in the Ramayana and his human delegate, the Raja, whose story is found in the local repertory. In the festival both of them are considered as "king", and are taken as a source for defining the hierarchy.

In order to clarify this point let us start by analysing the arguments of the three main groups of contenders – the supporters of Shringa Rishi, Balu Nag and Triyugi Narayan.

Shringa Rishi's supporters take into account his "*shastric*" relations with Rama in order to defend their god's right to the *dhur*. In the Ramayana indeed, Shringa Rishi is a sage who performed the fire sacrifice from which Rama's mother got pregnant. Shringa Rishi's supporters say that their god thus holds a special position in relation to Rama, and also because Shringa Rishi was later Rama's guru.

These arguments are countered by Balu Nag's supporters who say that their deity is the avatar of Lakshman, Rama's beloved younger brother who helped him to win the war. For them, it is thus an unquestionable right for Balu Nag to stand on the right side of his brother's chariot. Balu Nag's supporters did not contest that Shringa Rishi was Rama's guru, but they contested his place in a procession that is seen as a celebration of a war victory. "There was no reason for a *rishi* to participate in a battle!" so their argument goes.

Balu Nag's supporters also refer to the other legitimating model of hierarchy, that of "local history", according to which Balu Nag would have obtained the right of *dhur* from King Man Singh (17<sup>th</sup> century) as a reward for having brought rain:

"Under King Man Singh, there was a drought in this region. God Balu Nag brought rain and in 1667 the king built a palanquin for him. This king also gave him the right to be on the right side of Raghunath's chariot... It is thus like a credit given by the king to our ancestors and we have to respect it." (Kedari, a Balu Nag man, interview 2001)

Reference to both models of legitimisation was also made by Triyugi Narayan's supporters, as the journalist of the *Umar Ujala* reported in the article already cited:

"It must be remembered that the god Triyugi Narayan is the combination of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and so he is the lineage deity of the heirs to the throne of Kullu. This god, when the king dies, breaks the mourning of the royal family and gives the *tilak*<sup>27</sup> to the heir [to proclaim the new king]. According to Triyugi Narayan's medium, this god is on the right side of Raghunath during Dushera; the other deities come after him." (*Umar Ujala*, October 14<sup>th</sup> 2000, Chandigarh)

The reasons reported by the journalist are therefore both "*shastric*", by identifying the god with the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and "local" by remembering his role towards

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<sup>26</sup> Most of the village gods have two names, one local and another which identify the god with a figure of the two Mahabharata and Ramayana epics. The creation of an "epic" or pan-Indian identity for village deities is one of the main points in the programme of a RSS cultural association, the *Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojna Samiti* whose Kullu branch is presided by the king's eldest son. The programme of the association is adopted by many Kullu scholars, even those who have no link with RSS ideology.

<sup>27</sup> The *tilak* (or *tikka*) is the vermilion mark that is put on the forehead to signify the coronation.

the local heirs. The god's medium—another local source of legitimation—is also taken as proof to justify the claims of Triyugi Narayan's supporters.

All these arguments place the conflict on a religious level. They mingle, however, with another set of interpretations which enlighten the complex interrelation between these village gods' ritual activity and electoral politics.

M. R. Thakur, who was previously a member of the Dasher committee, gives a version of this story that is shared with other people of the region. According to him, the claims of Triyugi Narayan's supporters were purely incidental and essentially motivated by the desire to contest the decision of the administration to not invite Balu Nag, a god with whom Triyugi Narayan maintains good relations. The main rivals in this story are, in fact, Balu Nag and Shringa Rishi. But, according to M. R. Thakur, the real reason for their rivalry "has nothing to do with *shastra* or tradition" and he pointed out the interference of the state and central elections in the gods' territorial jurisdictions. To understand this, we must take into account the importance that village deities have in what is considered their respective territory, the *hār* (literary, "ploughed land").<sup>28</sup> People who live under the authority of a deity (his *hārye* "ploughmen" or "supporters") have a link with the deity which is not only the one between a devotee and a god, but also of a subject with a king, or of a tenant with a landlord. This relation formerly corresponded to real property rights of the deity over the land occupied and cultivated by villagers. This mixture of obligations and emotions makes a deity an important source of authority who can influence his people on all questions of public interest – including the choice of a candidate for elections.<sup>29</sup>

The necessity for a politician to ally himself with some powerful village deity is explicitly upheld by the villagers who often speak of the "local ballot system" and define it in this way:

"If a politician is favoured by a village god and satisfies his requests, people [of his jurisdiction] will most definitely vote for him. This is the custom. And the bigger a god's territory, the more the politician needs to gain the god's favour since he will get more votes." (Shravani priest from Dhobi village, interview 2000)

According to B. Thakur, the rivalry between Shringa Rishi and Balu Nag was directly linked to this ballot system and dates back to 1966. At that time, the lawyer Beli Ram, who was the hereditary priest of god Balu Nag and had control over his supporters was among the most influential political leaders of the region. When Kullu became a part of Himachal Pradesh in 1966 the constituency of Kullu split into three separate ones: Kullu, Banjar and Ani. The then Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, Y. S. Parmar, wanted to prevent Beli Ram from becoming elected as MLA in one of these three constituencies.<sup>30</sup> For that reason, when the constituencies' boundaries had to be marked out in Kullu, the territory of Balu Nag (including the three subdivisions of Sikari, Fathepur and Tiloknath), was included in the Ani constituency, instead of the Banjar constituency, to which, from a geographical point of view, it should have belonged. As B. Thakur explains, the idea of Parmar was that, since Ani is a reserved constituency where only a scheduled caste candidate can get elected, Beli Ram, who

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<sup>28</sup> See Berti (2001, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> As Singh points out in relation to the neighbouring district of Kinnaur: "No politician dares to publicly cross swords with a village deity. Candidates for elections begin their campaigns by presenting offerings to the local deity and by seeking its blessing. Should the devta [god] indicate his wrath against a particular candidate, the latter would have an uphill fight on his hands" (Singh 1989: 37).

<sup>30</sup> When Kullu was part of Punjab, Beli Ram was a Member of the Legislative Council of Punjab. According to Beli Ram's son, Parmar was thus trying to avoid his father, who was still linked to Punjab, using his Panjabi relations in Himachal Pradesh.

was from a Thakur caste, would be excluded from the electoral competition. Moreover, by putting Balu Nag's territory in the Ani constituency, he could also avoid votes by Balu Nag's supporters (who were in favour of Beli Ram) taking away votes from Deli Ram Shabab, who was the Congress Party candidate for Banjar. Beli Ram then decided to contest the election in the Banjar constituency as an independent candidate, but he lost and Deli Ram Shabab became MLA of Banjar.

In the Banjar constituency, Shringa Rishi is the most important deity and controls a large territory. Shringa Rishi's territory is, moreover, near to Balu Nag's and the two groups of devotees have many ritual and kinship ties. However, the exclusion of the Balu Nag territory from the Banjar constituency is at the origin of the chronic disappointment of Balu Nag's people, which is still felt forty years later. According to Beli Ram's son this disappointment is also the cause of the determination which Balu Nag's people show in their continuous contest against the Banjar constituency by disputing Shringa Rishi's supremacy in the Dashera procession.

The change of the political majority, in the course of time, did not change the fact that Balu Nag's people and the descendants of Beli Ram felt that they had been cut off from regional political life. In 1977, the Kullu king Mahesvar Singh got the ticket from the Hindu right-wing party and became the MLA of the Banjar constituency. The rivalry which had so far opposed two Congress Party leaders changed to a confrontation between the two main national political parties. Balu Nag started to be called a "Congress god" since his territory was still in a constituency that elected the Congress Party, and Shringa Rishi a "BJP god" since his constituency's MLA was Mahesvar Singh.

In 1998, the BJP coalition won the central elections and Mahesvar Singh was elected MP (Member of Parliament) for the Parliamentary constituency of Mandi. This constituency includes the territories of both gods, Shringa Rishi and Balu Nag. In the Banjar constituency, Mahesvar Singh was succeeded by his brother Karan Singh, also from the BJP, thus leaving the Party's connection with Shringa Rishi unchanged. Similarly, the Ani constituency, which includes Balu Nag's territory, remained under Congress Party power in both elections.

In this specific political context, Balu Nag's people understood the favour Mahesvar Singh accorded to Shringa Rishi (to give him the *dhur*) as being motivated by his will to get votes for his brother – who was to be re-elected in 2002. By contrast – the supporters added – being excluded from the king's brother's constituency themselves, they were discredited by the king. Even if the Ani Legislative constituency to which they belonged was included in the Mandi Parliamentary Constituencies, votes from Balu Nag's supporters would not have been quite as important to Mahesvar Singh as those in favour of (or against) his brother.

We will see, moreover, how the arguments of people involved in the conflict continually shifted from this political interpretation to a religious one, and how both villagers and politicians constantly accused each other of practising politics by using gods.

### **The *kārdār sangh* and mediation between the state and the gods**

Many people in Kullu knew of the political tensions behind the conflict between Shringa Rishi and Balu Nag. The political opponents of the king, even those not supporting Balu Nag, considered the conflict about the *dhur* as a good example of how the king was using his ritual role to gain political benefits. The conflict was getting more and more coverage in the newspapers and Balu Nag's people were frequently being interviewed by journalists and expressing their point of view.

To avoid further scandals – so went the rumour - the king was determined to put an end to the case before Dashera 2001. In an official preparatory meeting about the festival that he had organised as President of the Dashera Committee, he formally asked the *kārdār sangh*,

the association of village gods' administrators, to organise a compromise between the Shringa Rishi people and the Balu Nag people. The decision was sanctioned as follows:

"There is also a discussion concerning the conflict between Shringa Rishi of the Chaini kothi and Balu Nag of the Shikari kothi about who has the right to walk first on the right of Raghunath. It has been established that, as devi-devta, they have their own organisation [the *kārdār sangh*], it will be the task of this organisation to arrange a meeting between the two god's men [*hārye*] to decide on the matter." (Minutes of the meeting)

The *kārdār sangh* is an association which was formed in Kullu in 1992 on Mahesvar Singh's initiative, with the purpose of centralising the power of the deities' administrators in the hands of a few. It had the task of solving the problems concerning the organisation of local cults. The association is thus a consequence of the new political and administrative context in which the cults of village deities are managed. Since some of the gods still have land properties, the state continues to interact with gods' functionaries in everything involving the economic and bureaucratic aspects of these cults (taxes on gods' land, official registration of their tenants, and so on). These interactions have especially increased since the nationalisation of the Kullu Dasherā festival in the 1970s. Since then, in fact, village deities receive money from the Dasherā Committee to allow their villagers to bring them to the capital for the six days of the festival. The funds are given to the god's administrators by state functionaries.

The creation of the *kārdār sangh* can also be seen, however, as a way for the king of gaining greater control over the village deities' worship, by giving more power to their administrators than to their mediums. Indeed, while *kārdār* act as human beings and can be more easily approached with the logic of human interactions, the mediums act as gods and are less predictable in their behaviour and speech. Moreover, in contrast with former times, in the post-independence state the deities' mediums have no official role in public political decisions. They represent the deities only during possession, and this is not recognised by the state administration. It is a fact that Mahesvar Singh, in his ritual role of king, consults the gods by using their mediums—and we will see that he consulted them even for the problem of Shringa Rishi and Balu Nag. Nevertheless, in his political role as MP and as president of the Dasherā Committee, he only interacts with the deities' administrators, and mostly with the *kārdār sangh*.<sup>31</sup>

In the specific case of the resolution of the *dhur*, the king's decision to put it in the hands of the *kārdār sangh* was interpreted by Balu Nag's supporters as a clever political strategy. In this manner—so they said—the king could avoid disfavouring one or other group of villagers—which would have gone against his political benefit. Balu Nag's people also noticed how most of the *kārdār sangh* members had been chosen by the king and came from Banjar, the king's brother's constituency.

The *kārdār sangh*'s members had a different vision of the events. In fact, they had taken the king's decision as a sign of their own importance as *kārdār*, and appreciated the king's efforts to resolve the conflict through their mediation. This is at least what came out of the opening speech of Norottam, one of the *kārdār sangh* vice-presidents, during the meeting organised with the two gods' administrators involved in the conflict:

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<sup>31</sup> During the meetings organized between them and the administrators, the two roles often tend to become confused, which does not happen when his party is not in power and thus it is up to one of his political rivals to interact with temple administrators; in this case, there is a kind of cohabitation during which Mahesvar Singh manages purely ritual aspects linked to Raghunath.

"I request, in the name of the *kārdār sangh*, that a decision be taken after much consideration and without creating tension because Dashera is not only of Balu Nag or Shringa Rishi but is a festival of *aṭhāra karḍū* that means 18 crore [180 million] gods. The men [*hārye*] of Shringa Rishi and of Balu Nag must take a peaceful decision because we must live with gods and goddesses .... The governor also came to Dashera last year and he said: 'Do the gods come here to keep the tradition alive or do they come here to fight? So I join my hands and request you [both gods' administrators]: please think carefully and then make a decision'". (October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2001)

Others members of the *kārdār sangh* mostly emphasized the political reasons for the conflict. Shringa Rishi's administrator, especially, accused Balu Nag and Triyugi Narayan's palanquin holders of wreaking havoc during the festival in order to harm the king's political image. He also related the dispute to the political rivalry, which occurred when the constituencies were formed, between Deli Ram Shabab (the Congress party candidate for Banjar who was related to Shringa Rishi) and Beli Ram (the independent leader who had control over Balu Nag's temple):

"When Raghunath's chariot will be pulled by fighting there will be problems for the king. His image will be tainted. All newspapers will report this. So this is all a conspiracy against the king's prestige and it will become a major issue for his image! Since Beli Ram and Shavab have been having problems, the issue over left and right [places in the procession] has cropped up. Now the issue just harms the king's prestige."

Contrary to these political interpretations of the conflict, Balu Nag's supporters constantly justified their claims by using religious arguments. Among them, the schoolmaster of Balu Nag's village had even brought some pictures from a Ramayana cartoon strip where Lakshman was standing on Rama's right-side:

"Balu Nag is Laxman and Laxman is on the right of Rama. Both Rama and Laxman served the *rishis* [sages], it is their duty. But in the Ramayana of Valmiki when Rama went to Lanka to fight the war, *rishis* were not with him. Laxman was with him to help him to win the war and not Shringa Rishi."

Thus, the schoolmaster did not deny the prestige that Shringa rishi enjoyed as a *rishi*, but claimed the necessity to maintain a distinction between the two gods' nature. He had also brought some Ramayana passages as further evidence for his arguments:

"On the right side of Rama there was the one whose chest is very wide, eyes red, with curly hair on his forehead, called Laxman. He is dearest to Rama and an expert in war and politics. He is a great fighter, always victorious, and for the protection of Rama he never worries for his life..."

After many hours of discussion, seeing that compromise was unlikely, the *kārdār sangh* decided to submit the problem to Raghunath himself by going to the royal temple the next

morning and putting a *parchi* in front of him. The *parchi* consists of writing some alternative replies to what is requested on a few pieces of paper, and of arranging them in front of the god's statue. Then the temple is closed for some time and when it is reopened the papers are examined: the one that has moved indicates the reply. This system allows Raghunath, who is supposed to never manifest himself in a medium or in a palanquin, to be consulted. But the decision to consult him entrusted the case to the king again, since he is the owner of Raghunath's temple and only he can authorise divination proceedings.

### **The king as the keeper of history**

The appointment between the king and the deities' administrators had been fixed for a few days later in the Raghunath temple court. On the morning of that day, the king, as Member of Parliament, received the then Home Minister Advani, who had come from Delhi to give a speech about a hydroelectric project in the region. In the evening, still dressed in jacket and tie, he came to the temple where the gods' administrators were waiting for him.

Shringa Rishi's administrator was also there but, after having talked with the other god's supporters, he no longer agreed with the idea to put *parchi* in front of Raghunath. Shringa Rishi's people had finally concluded that to walk on Raghunath's right side was their legitimate right and that they would not back down, whatever the case. "Moreover—they said—what was the use of asking Raghunath? When everyone knows that this is a book, why ask the god if it is a book or not?"<sup>32</sup>

Hearing the Shringa Rishi people's objections, the king too refused to put the divination in front of Raghunath, thinking that if the god's decision was in favour of Balu Nag, Shringa Rishi would not accept it, and Raghunath would thus be humiliated. He explained his view in an angry tone of voice:

"You play with your deities as toys, you make fun, but I will not make Raghunath a toy. If you agree with each other, ask Raghunath [by divination], but everyone must accept his decision. If you do not agree, do not put a divination. This should be clear! For the other gods and goddesses, I will not stop Dashera but if you snatch deities [taking away their palanquin from the procession] I will not bring Raghunath to the festival ground. When deities fight it is a terrible time, a Dark Age."

The presence of village deities at Dashera is far from being presented here as an obligation vis-à-vis the king. It is rather the king's duty to organise the festival to maintain Raghunath's glory, and to allow all the deities to honour him by coming to the capital. Since the conflict between the two groups threatened the peaceful celebration of the festival, the king, in his role as private owner of Raghunath's statue, even threatened to not bring the god to the festival in the hope of forcing villagers to find a solution to their conflict.

Another reason dissuaded the king from allowing the divination in Raghunath's temple. The administrator of Jamdagni Rishi from Pej,<sup>33</sup> a god from a neighbouring area, having learnt the outcome of the administrators meeting, had come to Raghunath's temple. The men of the Jamdagni Rishi's temple committee signed a letter on behalf of this god, who had been consulted through his medium in the morning, saying that if the divination gave the honorific place to Balu Nag, Jamdagni Rishi would also claim it, as he had been on the right side of the chariot for six years.

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<sup>32</sup> The Balu Nag people commented on this refusal to ask Raghunath by saying that Shringa Rishi's people knew that the god would definitely have chosen Balu Nag and they would have felt humiliated.

<sup>33</sup> This god, also known by the name of Jamlu, has many temples in the region. The name Jamdagni Rishi seems to be more recent and due to the already mentioned trend to give an "epic" identity to village gods.

Jamdagni Rishi was thus a fourth god implicated in the conflict. People say that he increased his importance at the time of king Bhagvan Singh, the present king's grandfather. Bhagvan Singh decided to give this god the place at the right of Raghunath during the procession, at a period when neither Shringa Rishi nor Balu Nag were present at Dashera. He offered him a palanquin and, although the god belonged to the High Valley, he ordered the artisans to build it in the Low Valley style, so as to be able to give him the honourable place. According to the present king, the god was attributed the *dhur* until the god Shringa Rishi was brought again by his villagers to the festival. At that time, a quarrel blew up between the two gods during the procession. Jamdagni Rishi's supporters got angry and brought their god's palanquin back to his tent, refusing to participate in the procession. Inside the tent however, the god said through his medium that Shringa Rishi was his brother and blamed his own villagers for having taken him away. They accepted the god's decision and went back to participate in the procession. The story illustrates the fragmented nature of village deities' authority, which is exercised by different people acting in the name of the god but sometimes giving different advice.<sup>34</sup>

All the events of the Jamdagni Rishi's story were reported in the letter that the god's administrator presented at the meeting in Raghunath's temple. The letter concluded by saying that if the Jamdagni Rishi people had accepted the decision to assign the honorific place to Shringa Rishi, as they had done in the past, they would have refused all compromise with Balu Nag people. They would also refuse it if god Raghunath's response was in their favour. Faced with these objections, the king showed signs of impatience:

King: "Then how will the decision be made there? First there was a quarrel between two gods [Shringa Rishi and Balu Nag], then it became a quarrel between three gods [Triyugi Narayan] and now a fourth god [Jamdagni Rishi] is creating problems. Now tell me, do you want to make a decision or not?"

Balu Nag's administrator: "Shringa Rishi's people never want to make a decision!"

King: "I do not like to blame anyone but you both, or all three or four parties, tell me: do you want to draw a conclusion from this or not? Do you want to destroy Dashera? You said you want to put *parchi* [divination in front of Raghunath]. But *parchi* will be put for two parties: there is one who will get the place and the other will lose but when there are three or four parties how will you put it again? [Asking Jamdagni Rishi's administrator] if the response of the god Raghunath is for Balu Nag will you give him the first place?"

Jamdagni Rishi's administrator: "No, we will object! "

The *kārdār sangh*'s vice-president, Norottam, facing the difficulty of making decisions, asked the king to tell them the "history (*itihās*) of Dashera" since, as he was the king he was supposed "to know the tradition and the *shastras* [ancient religious books]". The king started his speech, immediately highlighting the political reasons which he considered to be behind the different arguments:

"Keep separate politics and *deuri* [here, "gods' system"]! What is this? I'm serving you with politics [as a Member of Parliament] and I'm serving you with *deuri* [as king] and still you are inflicting punishment on me. If I do something wrong with the gods' rules [*deunīti*] then do not bring your gods here! That will be punishment for me! Gods' things are related to religion. In politics today we

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<sup>34</sup> I am unable to say what really happened at that time and for what reason the god's medium ordered the people to go back to the procession...

won and tomorrow we will loose and the day after we will again win. Politics is politics! Today I'm in the BJP and tomorrow I could be in the Congress Party. People change party a hundred times but we cannot change the gods' system. The gods' system is forever. If you want to give me a vote, you vote, otherwise do not give it. It is your will. I know those administrators who are from the Congress Party but I never mentioned them here; if you want to fight, why would I have to take Raghunath [to the festival ground]? The Governor also said: 'this is the valley of the gods but gods are fighting here.'<sup>35</sup>

The king implicitly accused Balu Nag's people (whom he supposed to be from the Congress Party) of provoking disorder in order to boycott the festival and to damage his political image. He was thus accusing them of using religion for political purposes – which was exactly the same accusation Balu Nag's people made against him, saying that he was favouring Shringa Rishi only to get votes for his brother. "This is all king's politics! [the administrator of Balu Nag commented] He wants votes for his brother, that is why he is giving the honorific position to Shringa Rishi".

It is worth noting, nevertheless, that the opposition between the "BJP" and the "Congress Party" mentioned in his speech, did not exactly correspond to an ideological difference between Shringa Rishi and Balu Nag's villagers. As the king noticed, villagers constantly changed parties for reasons that had little to do with ideology.

The king exposed to the administrators what he thought to be the historical reasons for the conflict. In different passages of his speech, he evoked episodes which had taken place in the past between his father, King Mahendar Singh and Beli Ram, the hereditary priest of Balu Nag who, as we said, was in political competition with Deli Ram Shabab, the Congress Party's candidate for the Banjar Constituency. Beli Ram, who was also a reputed lawyer in the region, was closely linked to the present king's grandfather, Bhagvan Singh, who employed him as his tutor and gave him a lot of land. Upon the death of Bhagvan Singh, however, Beli Ram entered into conflict with his son, Mahendar Singh. This conflict – according to what the king said in his speech – had some repercussions on rituals. For instance, the king said that for many years, when Balu Nag arrived in the capital for the beginning of Dashera, he did not go to the palace to pay homage to the king as requested by the protocol. Instead, he went to Beli Ram's house and sat there for the six days of the festival. The king, then, continued to give his interpretation of the conflict by focusing on a more recent period, when he became the MLA for the Banjar constituency, which included Shringa Rishi's territory. At these elections, according to him, the former personal rivalry between his father and Beli Ram was transformed by Beli Ram's supporters into the "prestige issue" using the *dhur* to provoke a fight at the Dashera festival so that the scandal would damage his political image. He said for instance: After having illustrated what he thought to be the political dimension of the conflict, he started to consider what he called "tradition", by which he meant the respect of the ancient rules of distributing honours among deities. These honours were presented by him as a sort of "contract" between his ancestors and the village deities. He took as an example the case of Hadimba, a village goddess of the High Valley from whom, according to the royal chronicles, the first king of Kullu had received the kingdom. The name of this goddess, however, is also associated with the Sanskrit epic of the Mahabharata. Here Hadimba is the wife of Bhima, one of the five Pandava heroes. The king also made reference to this epic in order to explain why the Kullu kings have always considered Hadimba as their grandmother and why this goddess has always enjoyed special

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<sup>35</sup> The "valley of the gods" is the name frequently given to the Kullu valley.

honours during the festival. Among the various honours, she is the only deity to enter the throne room on the first day of the Dasher. The king explained:

"Now look, Hadimba came to our house and sat there. She is our family member. We are from the Pandava family and Hadimba was married in our family; ...you gods are big but no one can sit in our house, only Hadimba, as a family member...."

He then exposed the origin of the "contract" that his grandfather, Bhagvan Singh, had concluded with the god Jamdagni Rishi from Pej as well as with Triyugi Narayan, the two other main deities concerned by the conflict for the honorific position.

"Now I will tell you about Jamdagni Rishi... When the gods' land had gone to the tenants<sup>36</sup> no god came to Dasher and it was difficult to celebrate it. They [Jamdagni Rishi's people] only had a *kardu* [basket<sup>37</sup>] before. Then my grandfather ordered a palanquin to be built for this god and it was first brought here [to the royal temple]. Then it was taken to Pej in the night and in the morning it was decorated and brought to Dasher where he got the right to move it to the right side of Raghunath."

Listening to the kind of "history" used by the king to explain and legitimatise the attribution of Jamdagni rishi's honours, Kedari, one influential supporter of Balu Nag, tried to defend his god's right to get the *dhur* by using the same kind of arguments, i.e. local dynastic history. He recalled how at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during a period of drought, king Man Singh went to their village to ask Balu Nag to bring rain. The king, seeing his request satisfied, offered the god a metal face, a palanquin and ... the right to walk on the right of Raghunath. For Kedari, the tankri inscription<sup>38</sup> reported in one of the gods' metal faces was real proof of the "contract" that the king had concluded with their deity.

Kedari to the king: "I also have history! King Man Singh had given us a *mohra* [metal face to put in the god's palanquin] in which he wrote his own name..."

King: "O, you know, Triyugi Narayan also has a metal mask in which our name is written... On one of the metal masks of goddess Tripura Sundari [one of the king's lineage goddesses] our name is written; on goddess Panchali's metal mask our name is written. Our ancestors had given many metal masks to many gods! There is no god whose metal mask does not have our name written on it... That is like a form of respect we [kings] have shown the gods!"

Kedari: "But we have records as well..."

King: "Gods have no records! If a god speaks through the mouth of his medium then I will accept it. Look for example, in my father's time we never used to go to the Panchali goddess. Some years before Panchali [through her medium] ordered me to go to her village and I did. You see, if there is no quarrel, I will obey at once! I don't like to quarrel with any god. I want to obey them. Look, we

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<sup>36</sup> As I said before, this happened after independence when the government made land reforms, giving tenants the possibility of becoming the owners of the land they cultivated.

<sup>37</sup> People say that before palanquins, village gods were represented by the *kardu*, a basket into which the god's metal faces were put and which was carried on the head of a village person. A few deities still have this kind of representation.

<sup>38</sup> For *tankri* see note 10.

have had so many discussions [about this problem]. If you decide to fight then I will not take Raghunath to the festival. I want the compromise to be concluded tomorrow. Now you, the members of the *kārdār sangh*, have listened to our discussion, you have listened to Shringa Rishi's side, and Balu Nag's side, and my side as well. I have told you all the traditions systematically; now you carry on and make the decision. If there is a decision in favour of two parties then let me know. In such conditions I am not able to take Raghunath to the festival!"

The king thus denied that the royal inscriptions could be considered as historical proof. It is worth observing, however, that even if he claimed to recognise such an authority to the gods' mediums, he did not consult them in order to decide which of the competing gods should get the honourable position. By contrast, he insisted on putting the decision into the hands of the *kārdār sangh*. According to Kedari, the reasons for this were simple as he explained to me on another occasion:

"This *kārdār sangh* always follows the orders of the king only... You've seen, at one point the king says that he wants to separate politics from gods' traditions, but in fact he is doing totally the opposite. Gods' decision cannot be taken by vote! This is a dictatorship! ... You know, elections of *panchayat* [village councils] are coming up and the king wants to favour those from whom he will get more votes. This is the point!"

Kedari's opinion was shared by many other "Balu Nag followers"; for instance by Bhoj (a son of Beli Ram already mentioned), who accused the king of preferring a political solution to what was, for him, a "purely religious matter [that] should be left to Shringa Rishi and Balu Nag with no third-party intervention" (*The Indian express*, October 29<sup>th</sup> 2001).

At the end of the meeting, the king's decision to again hand over the responsibility for solving the case to the *kārdār sangh* left Balu Nag's supporters no more hope in getting the *dhur* for their god. In fact, immediately after the meeting with the king, the *kārdār sangh* held another meeting and finally decided that the place should be attributed to Shringa Rishi. If for any reason this god could not come to Dasherā, Jamdagni Rishi would then get the place.

The vice-president of the *kārdār sangh* for the Banjar area, Norottam, explained to me the reason for their choice:

"The king told us the whole history for the past five generations. He is the twenty-fourth king. In history, the name of Balu Nag was never mentioned, though the name of Shringa Rishi and Jamdagni Rishi were. It is true that in the Ramayana, Lakshman is on the right of Rama as Balu Nag people said, but the Dasherā is not based on an epic like the Ramayana. It is based on local gods to whom Kullu kings had given *muāfi* [untaxed land's property] and honours. So how could we [the *kārdār sangh*] take the decision in Balu Nag's favour? So we took our decision in favour of Shringa Rishi and we gave one copy of our report to the District Commissioner and one to the Security Police. We decided that whenever Shringa Rishi does not come, Jamdagni Rishi will take his place."

Norottam's argument was not exactly what the king had said in the meeting. One of the king's arguments which was implicitly in favour of Shringa Rishi was that in the Ramayana this god is the *guru* of Rama and Laxman and, "as all *gurus*, he needs respect". In fact, the double model of the past that people used as a reference in order to establish honours and privileges during Dasherā—that of the Sanskrit epic and of local history—was continuously

intermingled in the discussions, often leading those of the same party to contradict each other's arguments.

### Charging with sticks during the procession

The 2001 Dashera festival started on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, and many of the people who knew about the conflict thought that a scuffle was inevitable between Shringa Rishi and Balu Nag. The police forces were also on the alert and surrounded the royal chariot especially on its right side. Triyugi Narayan's palanquin circled the chariot following the king and other dignitaries. Shringa Rishi also took up his position and Balu Nag came behind. When the procession started, Triyugi Narayan suddenly moved away, and Balu Nag immediately took his place—just near Shringa Rishi's palanquin. The police decided to intervene and started to charge using their sticks, *lāṭhī*. The *lāṭhī*-charge continued throughout the procession as supporters of both deities carried them on the immediate right side of the Raghunath's chariot, though their position kept varying because of the ongoing struggle. The crowd started to get excited. The god Dhumbal, the so-called policeman of the gods,<sup>39</sup> rushed violently here and there with his palanquin, pushing people as well as policemen. The next day, a local newspaper reported the episode, with the headlines: *Fighting between Karkuns (gods' functionaries). Police carried out a Lathicharge (Devi Himachal 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2001)*. *The Indian Express* also reported the episode giving some details:

*"With deities at war, can devotees be far behind at Rath Yatra (chariot's procession)*

Thanks to the ongoing dispute between Lord Shringi Rishi, a prominent deity from the Banjar valley in the district and Lord Balu Nag, another deity from the Shikari subdivision of the Banjar valley, ... a question mark now hangs over the peaceful celebration of Kullu Dussehra...A.V. Prasad, Deputy Commissioner-cum-vice chairman of Kullu Dussehra Festival Committee, said that Balu Nag devotees, instead of ensuring implementation of Kardar Union's [*kardar sangh*] decision, indulged in violence. He said that a meeting would be convened to find out a permanent solution to the dispute, when the Dussehra festival was over". (*The Indian Express*, Chandigarh, October 29<sup>th</sup> 2001)

Newspapers do play an important role in the form that "honour issues" presently take during Dashera. Villagers commonly take the way in which journalists present the facts as a means to legitimise their claims or, on the contrary, to show how pressure is put on the media by the king and local administration. "Newspapers—a Balu Nag's supporter noted—are now reporting bad news... they are under pressure from the king!" Balu Nag's people were indeed furious. Some of them were temporarily arrested and many people, either among Balu Nag's villagers or among those who were supporting them, had been beaten by the police. Some days later, Kedari commented on the clash with the police as follows:

"Police were beating us and we were walking, we did not care and we said that we were ready to die to obtain our right! They [Shringa Rishi's people] want [to gain]

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<sup>39</sup>Dhumbal's intervention was also underlined by the newspapers. *The Indian Express* (23<sup>rd</sup> October 2001) reads: *The crowd of rathyatra controlled by Dhumal Nag*. In Kullu Dussehra, when the police has not made any arrangements, then god Dhumal Nag plays the role of Police, he marks the way for Raghunath. The work that cannot be done by many policemen, he does it himself. His palanquin charges into the crowd and quickly pushes the crowd in order to clear the way. ... sometimes this palanquin becomes so dangerous that people do not find time to step back.

this point of honour! They want to consider themselves big! Newspapers will write then that Dashera has been celebrated with pomp and glory and that Shringa Rishi was on the right of the god Raghunath! In my eyes it is only this that they care about, not rules or traditions! We are fighting for rules! If rules are not respected, what is the need of coming here! Before Dashera, we asked the god [Balu Nag] and he said [through his medium] "I want to go [to Dashera] because there is some obstacle for me and I want to break it, so I [Balu Nag] have to go!" I [Kedari] implored the god: "please let it be, stay at home" and he agreed. The next day, we again gathered and the god said: "I want to go!". But I said: "O god! I am scared that this thing [charges with sticks] will happen to us!". Now it has happened and 65 Balu Nag devotees were injured! But we will write to the District Commissioner now!"

Another source of legitimation which emerges from Kedari's words is the role attributed to the god itself in order to decide, step by step, what he wants or does not want to do. So, in Kedari's view, Balu Nag himself, by speaking through his medium, was responsible for the decision to participate in the royal procession even after the *kārdār sangh* had decided in favour of Shringa Rishi. They also maintained that Balu Nag himself had pushed his own palanquin during the procession with the aim of defending what he considered his legitimate position.

In fact, opinions diverged among the different protagonists over the way to interpret the conflict. Was it a real "war between deities", as expressed by the journalist of the *Indian Express* and by Beli Rama's son? Was it ancient rivalry between groups of villagers? Or was it a real conspiracy against the king in his role as BJP leader and, as Shringa Rishi's people said, "in order to break the votes of his brother, Karan"?

The king was amongst those who were convinced that gods had nothing to do with that story and that the conflict was exclusively provoked by men. We have seen how he used this argument to justify his refusal to allow people to proceed with divination in front of Raghunath and his conviction that the case should fall within the competence of the *kārdār sangh*.

### **The intervention of the goddess Panchali**

Two days after the chariot procession, when Dashera was at its third day, Panchali, one of the king's favourite goddesses, arrived at Raghunath's tent, situated at the centre of the festival ground. On arrival, the goddess's palanquin as well as her medium started to shake. He told people to go to the royal palace and tell the king to come immediately since Panchali had something to ask him.

After a while, the king came to the temple along with Tikka, his elder son. Seeing the king, Panchali showed her happiness by shaking her palanquin and by bowing towards him as a sign of affection. The king responded with tenderness – he kept his hand on the poles of the palanquin and waited patiently until the end of the greetings. Finally, through her medium, the goddess told him that she saw something wrong in the work related to the gods and that she wanted to lift the burden off her two god-brothers, i.e. Balu Nag and Shringa Rishi. She then told the king to organise a consultation of the gods in Raghunath's tent.

The king could not refuse her request. Panchali was one of his favourite goddesses since she was supposed to have given victory both to him and to his brother in the last elections. One priest of the royal family told me the story of how this happened. In 1982, the priest said, the king was candidate in the legislative elections when a man from Panchali village came to his palace saying that the goddess had asked through her medium to see him in her village,

about forty kilometres from the capital. The king asked the priest to go with him and they went along with the king's eldest son, Tikka. There they found people performing a ritual, just near the goddess's shrine. The goddess's palanquin was moving very fast and pushed the men who were carrying it up to a spot. There, it frenetically pointed towards the ground with its long poles. The medium started to shake and ordered people to dig immediately. Two statues were taken out and at that very moment, to the priest's surprise, the king started to weep. Panchali told him through his medium "O King! I've been here for a long time!<sup>40</sup> You must build a temple here and put my statues there!" She added: "O King! You came here with a bare head and I will put a turban on you!" After this episode, in fact,—the priest commented—the king became MLA, and people said then that the goddess had put the turban on his head. The priest continued:

"Some years later, villagers built a temple for Panchali and invited the king to the consecration ceremony. The goddess asked the Raja to offer her a *panch bali* [five sacrifices]. The king's brother, Karan, was also there, as well as Tikka. The consecration was celebrated with pomp. During the ceremony the goddess ran [in procession, with her palanquin] through more than twenty villages. She was in a violent state and was demanding many sacrifices. That day, king Mahesvar Singh and his brother Karan were also trembling. When the statues were brought there, tears came from the eyes [of the royal members]. There was a crowd of people there ... Thanks to the Raja and villagers they made a big sacrifice. The king's party [BJP] was not in power at the time and the goddess said to him "if you have come here with your heart, I will change the kingdom of Delhi". Six months later, in 1998, the Delhi government changed [the BJP coalition won the central elections], and the king became member of Parliament! His brother Karan was also a strong leader in Himachal. He told the goddess: "If I win the elections I will build a road up to your temple and will come to you by car". ... The Raja and Karan come frequently to the village and Tikka as well [...] Panchali's territory is inside that of Balu Nag. It is inside Balu Nag's jurisdiction, but many people there honour our goddess. She has many supporters in this region."

The links Panchali had with the king somehow came into conflict with the close relations she also had with the god Balu Nag, whose jurisdiction included her own. Panchali considered Balu Nag as her brother and used to participate in the Balu Nag village festival. Both of the deities' jurisdictions, although they were near the jurisdiction of Shringa Rishi, were not included in the constituency of the king's brother, but in the reserved constituency of Ani. Panchali and Balu Nag's people shared the same opinions concerning the conflict over the *dhur*. They were both convinced that his decision was to guarantee votes for his brother; This is how Panchali's medium commented on the *lāṭhī*-charge:

"All this is politics! Because, in our area, Karan [the king's brother] will not get any votes for the MLA seat; so to get more and more votes and seats they [the king and his allies] are entirely in favour of Shringa Rishi. Balu Nag is, for them, in the opposition [party]. So he is not important and Shringa Rishi is from the BJP and he is of importance. Panchali is respected by the king but Balu Nag is not respected because he is for the Congress party."

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<sup>40</sup> The revelation of divine statues through a medium is common in the region.

Panchali's request to the king to consult the gods about the conflict was aimed at exploiting the closeness she enjoyed with him,<sup>41</sup> in order to give support to her "brother" Balu Nag. The king accepted her request, and decided to perform what is called a *rāj puch*, a consultation of some deities. It was arranged for the next day in Raghunath's temple.

### A king under accusation

The mediums of about fifteen deities gathered for the consultation. The king disposed them according to their caste status. The medium of the goddess Hadimba, the "king's grandmother", along with those of the two kings' lineage goddesses, Shravani and Docha Mocha, sat outside the temple enclosure, since they were all from low castes. The mediums of Panchali, Balu Nag and Shringa Rishi, sat inside, being of high status. Other gods sat here and there. The medium of Panch Bir, a deity who had the task of opening the consultation and summing up at the end, started to tremble, in a standing position, just near the king:

God Panch Bir: "What is to be done? We know your misery. Men feel big today! Our power is in many places. We were gathering there [where there was *lāṭhī*-charge]. There was a fight between human beings. As the brothers [Shringa Rishi and Balu Nag] were disturbed, they will make a decision themselves. ... King! Why are you worried? O king! You must carry out *jagti puch* [universal consultation]! O subjects! Our soul is on the mountain. We will make a decision ourselves."

By defining the conflict as depending on human beings, Panch Bir adopted the same version as the king. Nevertheless, now that the gods were implicated in the fighting as well, he was of the idea that they had to be consulted to find a solution. After Panch Bir's speech, Shringa Rishi was consulted.

King to Shringa Rishi: "Say something Maharaja! Have you seen it? Now Nags [snake gods] become greater than you [rishi]! "  
Shringa Rishi: "I'm a god of the Age of Truth! I'm like that! O king! Today people from the Dark Age are doing politics with you!"  
King: "Now what can I do? You have to punish them!"  
Raghunath's priest: "People will say that gods used to fight here! "  
Shringa Rishi: "You must hold a *jagti puch* [a universal consultation]! It will get fire now!"

Here the king openly expressed his disapproval of Balu Nag by saying that, being a serpent-god, he could not claim the same right as a *rishi*-god. He thus followed a Brahmanical logic of the gods' hierarchy, which reserves a prestigious role for *rishis* [sages] in society. It should be noted, however, that in a ritual context serpent gods are considered by villagers as more powerful than *rishis* in a variety of matters. For instance, as regards controlling the weather or exorcism, people often say: "What can a *rishi* do? He's just a *rishi*; he only cares about purity!" The appreciation of "*rishi*" deities is, in contrast, part of a common trend among elites to find a pan-Indian base for regional culture. This project, as we have seen, includes the "discovery" of an "epic" identity for village gods and goddesses who are said to hide it behind their local name. For instance, Shringa Rishi was previously known as "Shankrini deo", from the name of the homonymous village, and became Shringa Rishi only some years ago. According to some informants, the claims of Balu Nag people that their god was an

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<sup>41</sup> Panchali's medium is from BJP and he used to go with Maheshwar Singh to BJP meetings.

incarnation of Rama's brother, Lakshman, was part of the same trend—they were seeking in this epic figure an argument to affirm the superiority of their god vis-à-vis Shringa Rishi/Shankrini deo. In spite of these observations, no one cared about the recent "claimed" identity of the two gods but rather about the different arguments sustaining each god's traditional right to walk on the right of Raghunath, and what was meant by "traditional".

Then it was Balu Nag's turn to speak:

King to Balu Nag: "O Maharaja! Today men are becoming greater than gods. We are acting as our fathers told us! But if you fight each other what shall we do?"

Balu Nag: "Nothing! You have to keep politics out of religion!"

King: "We do keep politics out of religion!"

Balu Nag: "O Maharaja! There should be no disparity in our work! I know that something is wrong!"

King: "I'm following the traditions as our ancestors told me but still [you think that] I did something wrong and you are punishing me. The universal consultation cannot be held so quickly! I have held this consultation today because the goddess [Panchali] told me yesterday to organise it. I will hold the universal consultation when Dashera will be over, at the place you indicate. Nobody is bigger than you! We feel shame for people!"

It is worth noting the contradiction between the king's statement in front of Shringa Rishi, that a *nāg* cannot be superior to a *rishi*, and his way of addressing Balu Nag, calling him "great king who knows eternal things", and saying that no one was greater than him. In fact this kind of expression is part of a standardised language used during consultation with deities, who are treated by the king as kings themselves in their respective areas. In his dialogue with Balu Nag, however, the fact that the king was saying to the gods "if *you* are fighting with each other what shall we do" sounded in contrast with the idea he had expressed on other occasions that deities were not responsible for the conflict. This could be interpreted as a hint either that the god was involved in the fighting or that the medium was speaking on his own.

The god, by speaking through his medium, indeed shared the opinion of his supporters and accused the king of letting his personal politics interfere with religious rules.

It was then the turn of goddess Panchali, whose medium sat just near Balu Nag's, to speak:

Panchali: "O king! Your ancestors were made kings of this area and chiefs of gods and goddesses. You broke our rules and our *sūtra* [sacred books]... O king! I have made you great! ...I gave you the turban in Delhi [as member of Parliament]! I will keep your turban high! Look! There is a problem between two brothers! You must make it clear....I want happiness for both these devotees. You have to hold the universal consultation! Otherwise you will see my punishment. Justice shall be done by asking us [deities], not by asking men. There should not be a one-sided decision."

King, sarcastically: "Who is afraid of punishment, Maharaja? You didn't see? With leather shoes they [fighting people] were on Raghunath's chariot. Now people are becoming greater than you! All gods are equal for us! They are not big or small!"

The king's reply to the goddess suggests that he interpreted her wrath as a reaction to the fact that people touched Raghunath's chariot with their shoes. In fact, the goddess was defending Balu Nag and was also condemning the king for his decision to leave the matter in the hands of the *kārdār sangh* instead of consulting gods and goddesses.

Other deities were consulted during the meeting, and among them the royal lineage goddess, Shrivani. She defended the idea of a conspiracy against the king, in order to discredit his name:

"What should not happen has happened! O king... I did not give a false answer. This [the conflict] is not enmity between gods, it is enmity against the king! So many people are listening! This is not our [gods] enmity but it is enmity against you, king! No one can divide us! Who can divide us? ... We [gods] are used instead of politics! Go then king, we will inflict punishment on those who make this mistake!"

At the end of the consultation, before Panch Bir summarised the deities' responses, the king manifested divine possession by trembling for some seconds—as often happens when he consults the gods. Then, showing deep sadness, he dried a tear from his eye.

### **The political solution to the case**

The consultation did not give a clear result. Gods and goddesses did not agree on how to interpret the conflict, and the only unanimous instruction they gave to the king was that he had to organise a bigger consultation with gods and goddesses (*jagṭī puch*). Moreover, the king did not ask the gods what he should do for the second procession of the last day of the Dasherā, called "The Lanka day", which was to be held two days later. This procession symbolises Rama's victory over Ravana, and Balu Nag people again claimed the right for their god to walk on the right of Raghunath.

The day before this second procession, the king organised another official meeting with the *kārdār sangh*, during which the issue of Balu Nag getting the *dhur* was submitted to a show of hands. Shringa Rishi obtained the majority. Balu Nag's people were shocked and denounced the pressures that the king had put on the *kārdār sangh*. The next day, the newspapers gave the news also reporting an interview with Beli Ram's son, the lawyer Bhoj:

*"Shringa rishi got the dhur for Lanka day. Balu Nag people objected to kardar sangh's decision.*

In the presence of the District Administration, Sunday night, there was an important meeting of Kardar sangh, and Shringa Rishi democratically obtained this right... In reaction to this decision the priest of Balu Nag, lawyer Bhoj [Beli Ram's son] said this decision was taken quickly, under political pressure. He said Balu Nag area is in Outer Seraj [Ani constituency] and Shringa Rishi area is in Banjar legislative area and the local deputy [MLA] of this area is from Kullu. To keep his vote bank safe, the decision was one-sided. He alleged that MP [Member of Parliament] Mahesvar used the dev-system [gods' system] for his own political benefit." (*Indian Express*, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001)

Being Beli Ram's son, Bhoj was directly informed of the long-lasting tensions between his father and the royal palace. Talking with me, he also compared what the king was doing with

local deities in Kullu with what Advani had done with Rama in Ayodhya<sup>42</sup> – both were using in politics what he called the "religion card".

After the meeting, the District Commissioner, on instructions from the Dashera Committee, sent a note to Balu Nag's people announcing that they had been banned from the Dashera festival in accordance with article 144 on "Law and Order":

"Whoever is armed with any deadly weapon or with anything used as a weapon of offence, likely to cause death as a member of an unlawful assembly, shall be punished by imprisonment for a period which may extend to two years accompanied by a fine or by both."

Balu Nag people did not participate in Lanka day. The reason they gave was not because they had been banned, but because they wanted to respect the decision of their god, who refused to go. Other deities too, like the goddess Panchali and the god Triyugi Narayan, left the festival before the procession. Panchali's medium commented on the decision of the administration as follows:

"They banned Balu Nag<sup>43</sup> because they feared that his people may force their way to walk on the right side of Raghunath and if beating people with sticks is used again, it will discredit the king's name. The other party like the Congress will provide a further opportunity to criticise the BJP and the king."

Some days after the end of the festival, the king organised the *jagtī puch* at the royal palace. Far from being a "universal" consultation, the deities invited by the king were in limited numbers and did not include Balu Nag. None of the gods dealt with the problem of Balu Nag and Shringa Rishi. All limited their comments to declaring that the king was faced with a major problem and that they would have tried to solve it. Norottam, the vice-president of the *kārdār sangh*, commented on the lack of results of the *jagtī puch* as proof that the power that the mediums had to speak on behalf of the gods was now on the decline. "They were all talking about clouds and water and no one was providing a solution for those two gods!" – he said, while noting the crucial role played by the *kārdār sangh* in solving the problem.

## Conclusion

The idea of separating religion from politics does not seem to have existed in royal times, where the kingdom was officially ruled by a sovereign god to whom subordinate gods (who ruled at village level themselves) paid tribute and showed their respect annually. In contrast, at a theoretical level at least, two domains can now be distinguished, and at the same time they also constantly overlap each other. We have seen, for instance, how a Congress leader such as Lal Chand Prarthi, while defending the independence of the new democratic state from royalty, tried to legitimate his request by showing that he was possessed by all the village gods. Similarly Mahesvar Singh, while accusing villagers of using their gods as political weapons for their internal factionalism, created *ex-novo* ritual relations himself with

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<sup>42</sup> Ayodhya is the city where Rama is said to have been born. In 1990 the Hindu right-wing leader L. K. Advani led a "Rama's procession" with Ayodhya as the final destination. During this procession he appropriated for himself some iconographical traits of the god Rama, his Toyota van itself being transformed in order to evoke Rama's chariot. For the political implications of this procession see, for example, Davis 1996. In 1992 the militants of the Hindu right-wing, headed by Advani, provoked the destruction of a mosque dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which was supposed to have been built at the god's very place of birth.

<sup>43</sup> The practice of banning a village god was also attested during the colonial period. (Emerson, *manuscript*, p. 11-14)

goddess Panchali to guarantee his or his brother's victory during elections. And Panchali's medium too, while accusing the king of interfering with politics in ritual rules, constantly recalled—when speaking on behalf of the goddess—how Panchali herself had sent the king to Delhi as a Member of Parliament. The goddess even took advantage of the political role of the king and of his brother, since she had received the promise from them to have a road built up to her temple.

Nevertheless, contrary to Panchali's intentions to establish a sort of continuity between Mahesvar Singh's role as king and as member of the Indian Parliament, other groups of gods' supporters denied this very continuity. Balu Nag people, for instance, opposed what they thought to be the legitimate right of a king to give honours to local deities and the political (electoral) implications that they thought to be behind the relations Mahesvar Singh had with some of them. More specifically, they opposed a stereotyped royal epoch when King Man Singh asked for god Balu Nag's help to preserve the kingdom's welfare, and gave him in return the honour of *dhur*, with the personal and private aims for which Mahesvar Singh today attributes this very honour to Shringa Rishi. What is difficult to grasp, however, is the attitude of Balu Nag's people. The (personal and political) hostility that they explicitly demonstrate towards the king indeed contrasts with their commitment to kingship: not only do they bring their god to Dasherā, but they also claim that he is Raghunath's brother and, as such, has the right to walk on his right during the royal procession. This contrast highlights the distinction made by Balu Nag's people between the human king, Mahesvar Singh, who was the target of their accusations, and the king-god Raghunath, towards whom they expressed all their attachment. They were thus playing on the duality of the local kingship, the man and the god. However, it would be misleading to interpret their determination to walk on the right of Raghunath's chariot simply as an expression of their devotion towards the royal god. Indeed, with a curious diversion of what is considered to be the strategic role for which the cult of the royal god had been introduced in Kullu, here Raghunath was the instrument and the very criteria by which Balu Nag's supporters could publicly show the superiority and the "prestige and glory" of their beloved village god.

Thanks to his double role—ritual and political—the king continues to participate in all the multiple, fragmented instances of power which dominate local village society. First, he participates in the institution of gods' mediums not only by consulting them frequently but also by being himself occasionally possessed by the local gods during these consultations. He then controls worship of Raghunath, being the owner of his temple and patronising his cult. He is also considered by some people as the "chief administrator" (*mukhiyā kārdār*) of all village deities, which gives him a certain authority over village *kārdār*. Finally, when he is the president of the Dasherā Committee, he also becomes the main intermediary between the state and the *kārdār* for getting funds allotted to the deities for the festival.

It can therefore be said that this multiplicity of sources of local power allows the different competitive groups of gods' devotees to easily contest and disapprove of Mahesvar Singh's behaviour. This is at least true in the new political context, where the chances of the king to maintain his political power depend on his capability to get the largest consensus among the different groups of gods' supporters. Contrary to royal politics, contemporary electoral politics is based in fact, on the criterion of number.

As Balu Nag people insistently argued, the need to have the largest consensus inside his own constituency or that of his brother can be seen as one of the crucial reasons which brought Mahesvar Singh to create the *kārdār sangh*, namely to delegate to some chosen members the power to manage people's conflicts concerning the gods' affairs. Although it is not possible to say what the situation was in the past, the recent creation of the *kārdār sangh* does effectively enable Mahesvar Singh to avoid the question of taking an explicit position for or against one or other of the groups of gods' supporters. It also, in some ways, "secularises"

the gods' decision-makings, taking more into account what *kārdār* decides by official meeting or democratic votes, than what gods themselves pronounce through their human receptacles.