

## **Constructing the State in the Western Himalaya**

**Chetan Singh**

*Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla*

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During the medieval period different states in the Himachal region passed through a broadly similar political process by which small ruling elite consolidated its position through a clever use of religion. The local cults of villages and chiefdoms in small river valleys were integrated with the 'great tradition' of Brahmanical Hinduism in a manner that created a complex hierarchy of deities at the village, intermediate and State levels. Their systematic incorporation in the socio-political system corresponded with the temporal hierarchies of authority in the State, and enabled the *raja* to exercise domination on behalf of the supreme deity who was invariably Visnu or his incarnation, brought into the hills by the Brahmins. Notwithstanding the local variations arising out of geographical and cultural differences and historical reasons, Sanskritization of State polity discussed in this paper resulted in a hegemonic system that outlasted even the monarchies that had initially created it.

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### **Introduction**

The expansive military campaigns that periodically steered historic empire-building activities in the north Indian plains through different historic periods must have been anxious times even for the rulers of the somewhat inaccessible principalities of the western Himalayan region of Himachal. As they watched these imperial endeavours with concern from the fringes, it probably became evident to them that military power alone could not ensure the longevity of states. Conquests had to be consolidated by establishing the legitimizing hegemony of a small ruling elite. This, it soon became apparent, was frequently achieved through the clever use of religion. The complex relationship between the diversity of local cults and Brahmanic religion was part of a process of political domination. The Himachal hills rulers realized quite early the usefulness of non-military, hegemonic control.

The 'great tradition' of Brahmanic Hinduism was previously seen as a superimposition upon local, non-Brahmanical belief systems. But this doctrinal supremacy of Brahmanism was neither complete nor unquestioned. While many essential elements of Brahmanical beliefs certainly permeated folk religious practices, the latter, too, transformed Brahmanic religion in different regions by compelling it to adapt and change.<sup>1</sup> So influential, indeed, seems to have been the varied local traditions that one can hardly talk of a homogenised Hinduism. Despite the overarching influence of Brahmanism, there appears to have been no reduction in the astonishing number of folk cults that flourished across South Asia. But this does not indicate that there existed explicit

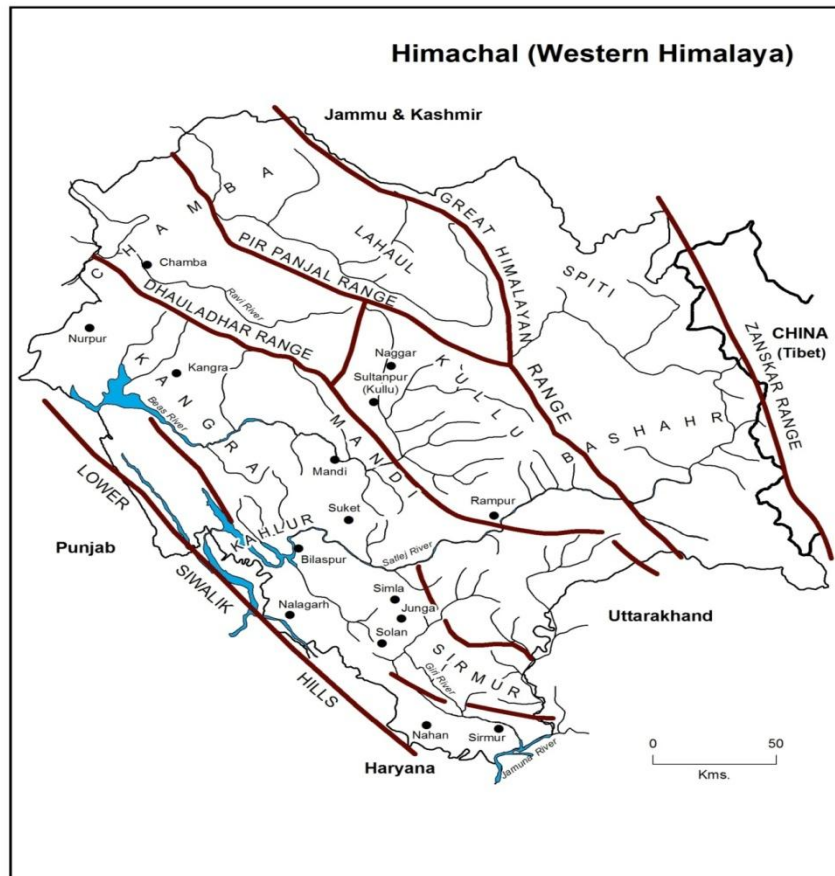
distinctions between folk and Brahmanic traditions. The gods and rituals of the two 'traditions' usually addressed different, yet overlapping and complementary, concerns. Mandelbaum has termed these as 'transcendental' and 'pragmatic'.<sup>2</sup> He explains:

In India, the gods charged with the cosmic verities are not expected to attend to a baby's colic or a lost cow. Yet both baby and cow must be cared for, since they are part of the grand design. In India, answer is through specialization of function and hierarchical arrangement among supernaturals, as among men.<sup>3</sup>

More specifically, such hierarchies amongst gods and their wide range of functional specialisations (within the instrumental and spiritual aspects of life associated with the 'little' and 'great' traditions, respectively) formed the general structure of socio-political organization in Himachal. The State, too, was part of this terrestrial reflection of the cosmic order. In the overlap between governmental authority, social organization and religious sanction the rulers of the Himachal principalities played a central role. Upon them rested the responsibility of creating and maintaining an ordered world. But there were variations in the manner in which monarchical authority was locally constructed. There existed points of difference between the larger States and the tiny chiefdoms of the region.

### **Geography and Political Expansion**

The large States of Himachal were Chamba, Kulu, Mandi, Kangra, Bashahr, Kahlur and Sirmur. Perhaps the oldest and least mountainous of these was Kangra. It remained a dominant power in the area for most of the medieval period, till its annexation by Jahangir in the early seventeenth century. Throughout the seventeenth century Kangra was subject to direct Mughal rule. Because of its liminal position between the Punjab plains and the mountains, Kangra did not fully represent the typical Himalayan State. Chamba was another ancient State, but clearly more representative of western Himalayan polity than Kangra. Originally, the rulers of Chamba seem to have controlled only Brahmaur in the upper Ravi valley. Under Meruvarman (AD 680) and later under Sahilvarman (AD 920), Chamba established control over adjoining chiefdoms lower down in the valley.<sup>4</sup> It was here, on the right bank of the Ravi, that the capital town – Chamba – was finally established.



Most of the other large States, however, expanded during the medieval period through a long-drawn process of territorial conquest. The chronology of political expansion suggests that they originated as chiefdoms that first brought the main river valley under their control. Thereafter, the smaller tributary valleys were incorporated. As the expanding State reached out to these secluded valleys, the tiny political entities (*thakurais*) located here were either extinguished, or incorporated as feudatories of the newly emerging monarchical States.<sup>5</sup> There are references in the Chamba inscriptions of as early as AD 1160 and AD 1170 to some *ranas* having already acknowledged the suzerainty of Raja Lalita Varman. It is possible that these *ranas* also served as functionaries of the State. Under Balbhadra (AD 1589-1641), a large number of land grants and gifts were made to Brahmans. This certainly indicates that the formal 'Brahmanization' of the State political system had already taken place.

State formation in Kulu has a long history. But its expansion in medieval times took place under Raja Sidh Sen (AD 1500). His first victory was over a local *thakur* and this enabled him to capture territory that lay above the village of Jagatsukh, on both banks of the river Beas. Local tradition asserts that, thereafter he was elected as Raja of Waziri Parol. Subsequently, a rapid and significant expansion of the State occurred in the reign of Raja Bahadur Singh (AD 1532). During this period, the control of the Kulu ruler extended to Waziri Rupi, Shainshar Kothi, Makarsa in Hurla Khad (which actually functioned as Bahadur Singh's capital) and also Chaini Kothi. During the reign of Raja Jagat Singh (AD 1637-1672) the area lying on the right bank of the Beas – that was then the small kingdom of Lag – was annexed to Kulu. Kulu State, therefore, controlled extensive territory lying on both banks of the Beas. It was at this time that the Sanskritization of State polity apparently took place. Lord Raghunath became the state deity and was established as the ruler of the State while the Raja was declared his first servant. The capital, too, was transferred to Sultanpur from Naggar about 1660.

The State of Mandi expanded in a strikingly similar fashion. It grew out from the village of Manglaur (in Kulu) where the estranged brother of the Raja of Suket had earlier established himself as the *thakur*. Local tradition asserts that it was Kalian Sen (AD 1300) who first acquired the land at Batahuli across the river from Mandi. It was here that 'Old Mandi' was first established. Between 1332-1470, under Hira Sen and his successors, the endeavour of suppressing the numerous *ranas* and *thakurs* continued. The area that finally came to constitute the principality of Mandi was largely annexed by Ajbar Sen (AD 1500), and Mandi town was established in AD 1527. However, till as late as the reign of Narain Sen (AD 1575) several *ranas* remained in control of their separate territories, and it was only through the efforts of Raja Suraj Sen (AD 1637) that most of these *ranas* were finally defeated. During his reign – in a manner very similar to Kulu and at almost the same time – Lord Madho Rai was deemed as the formal ruler of the State of Mandi in 1648.

The expansion of each of these States mentioned above brought within their political ambit geographically distinct areas and people with different and long established socio-religious traditions. As mentioned earlier, people and territories could be militarily subjugated by the State. Establishing permanent dominance over vanquished people, however, presented an immensely more complex problem.

## **Religion**

### **The Mainstream**

All large States of Himachal invariably controlled an extensive part of an important river valley. The State capital was usually situated on the bank of the main river.<sup>6</sup> It was here that the *raja* resided and held court, and from where he exerted political control over the State. The centres of formal religious authority, too, were located in the main valley. Indeed, most of the important

temples dedicated to Brahmanical deities were initially built in the main river valleys.<sup>7</sup> A temple dedicated to Lakshana Devi had been built in the seventh century AD in the Ravi valley at Brahmaur, the ancient capital of Chamba.<sup>8</sup> By the tenth century AD the temples of Mani Mahesh and Narasimha too, had come into existence. At Chhatrarhi (also in Brahmaur area) a Shakti Devi temple was constructed in the seventh century AD. With the shifting of the capital to Chamba town, a large and impressive complex of temples dedicated to Visnu and Siva was raised at the new capital roughly between AD 920-1000.<sup>9</sup> Three of the temples in this complex were dedicated to Visnu, and three others to Siva. Even in Kulu State, several important Siva temples were constructed quite early at Jagatsukh, Bajaura, Naggar and Dashal, which are all places located in the main Beas valley. In the Satlej valley were built the Sun temple at Nirath, and the Dattatreya (Visnu) temple at Datnagar. Even the ancient village of Nirmand – with the temples of Parsuram, Ambika Devi and Dakhani Mahadeva – is situated in the Satlej valley. Political authority and religious orthodoxy were almost always located in the central valley along which the larger monarchies expanded and exercised complete control. Virtually all the extant copper plates of the Chamba rulers recording the grant of land to different individuals and institutions pertain to villages located in the Ravi valley.<sup>10</sup> The largest number of beneficiaries must have been either from the politically central areas of the State or Brahman immigrants in the service of the raja. This uneven distribution of copper plates certainly indicates the complete administrative control of the Chamba rulers over the Ravi valley, but it does not mean that their influence did not extend to the tributary valleys.<sup>11</sup>

We also need to factor in the possibility that religious processes that asserted the dominance of Brahmanic deities could also follow on the heels of larger sub-continental political developments. Brahmanism was not merely consequential to the emergence of large local States. Some land grants and temples at Nirmand and Nirath can be attributed to regional feudatories (*samantas*) who owed allegiance not to any hill ruler, but to an imperial power outside the region. In such cases, the areas falling under the sway of Brahmanism were situated at the fringes of an imperial authority located in the north Indian plains.

As a result of the Brahmanization of the main river valleys, there was a difference between a section of the ruling elite that resided in the capital and the influential groups and clans that inhabited the more distant territories but owed allegiance to the *raja* and the State. This was not simply the differential in access to political power. A social distinction was probably sought to be made. The elite in power claimed a higher caste status and adopted Sanskritized socio-religious practices. Its closer association with Vaisnavism seems to have distinguished the elite from the peasantry.<sup>12</sup> This was true of Chamba, but even more so of States such as Mandi, Kulu and Bashahr. Visnu, in one or another incarnation, was the presiding deity of many of these States and enjoyed a position superior to that of any other deity.<sup>13</sup> So close indeed, was the association of the ruling elite with Vaisnavism, and so clear its demarcation from popular religion, that the worship of Visnu does not appear

to have spread beyond a few politically important centres. Though this cult was probably introduced in Chamba as early as the tenth century AD, it remained virtually confined to the town of Chamba.<sup>14</sup> The same seems to have been the case in Mandi.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to one or the other incarnation of Visnu being declared as the supreme deity of most of the large States, each of the ruling families owed personal loyalty to a tutelary goddess (*kulaj*). The family goddess of the Chamba ruling house was Champavati<sup>16</sup> and that of the Mandi *raj*as was Sri Vidya.<sup>17</sup> Tripura Sundari of Naggar (and perhaps even to a greater extent Hidimba) occupied this position in the case of the Kulu rulers. The rulers of Bashahr state that bordered Tibet, and which had a substantial Buddhist population, had Bhima Kali as their family goddess..

From amongst the deities of the Hindu pantheon, Siva was by far the most extensively worshipped in the hills. Siva worship apparently prevailed in the region prior to the coming of Vaisnavism. Temples dedicated to Siva are found spread over a much wider area than those of any other deity.<sup>18</sup> It appears that local heterodox beliefs and practices, so typical of Himalayan Hinduism, were quite receptive to the growing popularity of Siva. Numerous village gods and local cults in Himachal became, by association, 'instrumental' extensions of a higher and more distant 'spiritual' Siva.<sup>19</sup> Through these linkages with smaller cults, Saivism established deep roots and became entwined with a network of diverse indigenous beliefs that collectively constitutes what is sometimes called the 'small tradition'.<sup>20</sup> In their occasional interaction with the Brahmanical order, these cults claimed a position within the Saivite tradition. At the village level, however, non-Brahmanical religious practices were central to the belief system of the community. They enabled the common peasant to approach the local deity to expeditiously address his immediate, rather mundane, concerns.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Hidden Valleys**

In the distant and almost hidden valleys of Himachal then, a pragmatic religion had been cobbled together. It centred on the village *deota* (god) and was rooted in the daily life and social organisation of the peasantry. Yet, it reflected a world-view that recognised the pre-eminence of the great gods of the Hindu tradition and the political system they legitimised.<sup>22</sup> A functional hierarchy of gods (*deotas*) is the most striking feature of Hinduism as it was, and still is, practised in Himachal. In this:

The key-stone is undoubtedly the *kul ka devta* or family god, and it is, therefore, unfortunate that the normal translation of *devta* as godling has obscured the prominent part he plays in the religious system of the hills. *Devta*, it is true, means literally a small god; but it is used not in the contemptuous sense conveyed by the expression godling, but to distinguish the minor deities from the *Devs* or mighty divinities who are too far removed from the daily worship of the people, whose

religion centres round the ancestral god. The jurisdiction of the latter is both personal and territorial. He exercises sway over the hamlet, group of villages or valley recognised from time immemorial as his domain....<sup>23</sup>

The mountain peasantry perceived and ordered the spiritual universe in the only way it knew – as an image that mirrored the temporal social order. Just as village headmen (*seanas*) were subservient to their *ranas* and *thakurs*, who in turn owed allegiance to the *raja*; so it was that village *deotas* were subordinate to a more powerful territorial god.<sup>24</sup> Territorial gods in turn, offered obeisance to the supreme deity of the State. In some instances an influential *deota* even had lesser *deotas* acting as his ministers, officials and door-keepers (*wazir*, *kotwal*, *dwarpala*, etc.). The latter, too, had shrines of their own and their importance is not to be underestimated. In the early decades of the last century (and this is also true today) it was observed that:

The *wazir* is sometimes a being of great importance, his shrine containing more votive offering than that of his master; but this is as it should be, for, as they say, the *wazir's* business is to deal with the ordinary affairs of the ordinary people and so relieve the god of the petty importunities of his subjects. If the underlings are sometimes arbitrary and tyrannical, they only follow the examples of their human counterparts.<sup>25</sup>

### **Hegemony**

Not surprisingly, an astonishing multiplicity of folk cults flourished and held sway in different parts of each State.<sup>26</sup> There also existed visible differences between the beliefs and practices of the ruling elite on the one hand, and the common people on the other. The political predicament before the State, therefore, was how to incorporate two apparently diverse world-views into one recognizable and acceptable cosmic order. This would then be an order that the monarch would claim to obey, uphold and implement in the material world. An effective solution to this problem emerged gradually in the form of a hegemonic, but flexible, socio-political system that drew heavily upon religion and religious symbolism.

This hegemonic system became possible because for the hill peasant the worlds occupied by the *deotas* and mortals were not insular. The devotees of a *deota* were regarded as his subjects (*raiyat*), and temporal relations between the subjects of different *deotas* were closely interwoven with the relationship of their respective *deotas* with each other.<sup>27</sup> Village *deotas* were invariably subordinate to a more powerful territorial deity even if there were occasional disagreements between them. As a result, their followers too, were drawn into a corresponding position of subservience. This was not where the matter rested. At the top of the pyramid of political and religious authority were situated the *raja* and the reigning deity of the State.

The annual Dushehra festival at Sultanpur, in Kulu, is the clearest exposition of how this sovereignty of the *raja* and the State deity over their realm was symbolically established and renewed. Thakur Raghunathji, the supreme deity of the State, mounted his chariot and was escorted by the *raja* to an open ground where all the *deotas* of the realm were assembled in their traditionally allotted places in a manner quite similar to courtiers. Obeisance was paid and allegiances were extracted. The traditional relationship between Lord Raghunath, the *raja* of Kulu, the *deotas* and the common subjects was reconfirmed at this annual enactment. It has been aptly described in the district gazetteer of 1917:

Once a year there is a great parade of all the *deotas* of Kulu in honour of the god Raghunath at Sultanpur, the ancient capital. In olden days they were brought in by the express command of the *Raja*, who seems to have been lord paramount of the gods as well as of the men of his kingdom, and this subservience of church to state still continues in the neighbouring independent state of Mandi. Doubtless it is based on the fact that the temples of the *deotas* possess endowments of land revenue which were held at the king's pleasure. The revenue of about one-seventh of the cultivated area of Kulu is alienated in this way, but now that it is held during the pleasure of the British Government the *deotas* are not so careful to pay their annual homage to Raghunath as formerly...<sup>28</sup>

An intricate network of hierarchically ordered deities stretched out to the remotest corners of the Himachal monarchies. Through it, the *rajās* exercised an influence of a kind, and in a manner, that even the most efficient administrative methods could hardly have matched. Former subjects of the isolated *thakurais* – once politically independent – were now politically bound to their monarchs, and their village *deotas* (or their territorial god) subordinated to the presiding deity of the State. This linking of Brahmanical Hinduism to the extremely influential cults of the 'little tradition' ideologically reinforced the dominance of the upper castes and the political authority of the monarchical State. This entwining of the *raja's* political pre-eminence with a 'spiritual hierarchy' between superior and inferior gods was probably based upon an older tradition: one that preceded the formation of a clearly monarchical State. In fact, there were some parts of Himachal where this older tradition appears to have persisted.

### **Chiefdoms and Intermediate Societies**

#### **Legitimacy and Legend**

It would be useful to look more closely at some of the smaller political entities. They apparently retained the characteristics of the old *thakurais* (chiefdoms)



that had in many parts of Himachal been subsumed by the larger, expanding monarchies. To stretch the argument further, the organization of these small *thakurais* probably represented a polity that preceded the larger States.<sup>29</sup> The difference between the two was not simply the extent of territory they controlled. The smaller states – or *thakurais* as they were termed – continued to draw legitimacy from local politico-religious traditions. These were folk traditions – as folk traditions often are – particularly rich in myths and legends.

An essential constituent of a society's historical consciousness is the constant need to establish an unbroken link with antiquity. In most pre-modern societies, myth, legend and folklore contributed significantly to the construction of this continuity. A collective 'memory' of the past despite being rooted in myths (and legend), commonly came to be accepted by society as its history.<sup>30</sup> Despite the differences that may exist between myths and legends an important factor common to both is that they are believed by the society in which they are prevalent to be an honest recounting of the past.<sup>31</sup>

The linkages between folklore, legend and myth can conceivably result in the emergence of a 'history' and a set of beliefs with which a community closely identifies and upon which it bases its socio-political system.<sup>32</sup> Communities acquire ethnic identities to distinguish themselves from other groups, but they also simultaneously create distinct norms and practices to facilitate their own internal integration. Defined geographical territory and a common language and forms of expression do contribute importantly to the initial emergence of ethnicity, even though the historical circumstances in which ethnicities have been nurtured are curiously diverse. In all societies, however, 'the imagining of the past was an ongoing creative process'.<sup>33</sup> The episodic reconstruction and reassertion of a common past by a community enabled it to pronounce itself as an entity rooted in antiquity. Like the sacred myths through which a society's links with antiquity were traced, its norms and values, too, were closely associated with folk tradition. The political order in the *thakurais* – especially the position of the chief – was strengthened by the legitimacy provided to it by popular cults.

The medieval *thakurais* of Himachal that had managed to survive as autonomous political entities till the early nineteenth century were administratively clubbed together by the British Government as the Simla Hill States. While Bashahr (a large State included among the Simla Hill States) was the exception that controlled territory on both sides of the river Satlej, the petty chiefdoms occupied only the watersheds of small tributaries of either the Satlej or the Giri rivers. Physiographically, therefore, these *thakurais* were either in the nature of a few mountain ridges and their flanks, or an almost bowl-like tract drained by small rivulets. They were difficult to access from the main river valleys, often occupied secluded niches that made them militarily and economically unattractive prizes for conquest by the larger States. This explains, albeit partly, their continued survival as *thakurais*. The example of one of the bigger chiefdoms – Keonthal – can be used to explain how the interweaving of religion, politics and geography created intermediate socio-political entities such as chiefdoms.

### Keonthal Thakurai

With the arrival of the British in the region during the first decade of the nineteenth century, the boundaries of some of the hill States underwent a change. Keonthal came to consist of eighteen *parganas* spread over six detached tracts.<sup>34</sup> This territorial fragmentation was the result of the *rana* surrendering some territory to the British, as payment due for military assistance provided to him for expelling the Nepalese invaders from Keonthal. In 1823, however, the detached *pargana* of Punar was given to Keonthal by the British government in lieu of additional land that the latter had taken over from the chiefdom. Sometime later, the British obtained some more land from Keonthal for the expansion of the newly established hill-station town of Shimla. As compensation, the *pargana* of Rawin was given to Keonthal in 1830.<sup>35</sup> The *pargana* of Rawin had originally been a separate *thakura*<sup>36</sup> with a long historical tradition of its own and its late incorporation into Keonthal prevented it from becoming part of the hegemonic system that had historically evolved in Keonthal.

The original territory of Keonthal consisted of two geographical tracts. The southern tract (*Halka Janubi*) in which the State capital of Junga was situated, consisted of ten *parganas*. Further north was the *Halka Shumali* or the northern tract. The villages of the core southern tract of the Keonthal coalesced around the religious cult of Junga. It was through this cult that the Keonthal rulers exercised a hegemonic influence over their chiefdom. Folk tradition traces the mythical origins of *deota* Junga to a disgruntled prince of Kutlehr. The prince left his home and came to Koti (where a branch of the Kutlehr family had earlier established a separate State) which shares its southern boundary with Keonthal. Subsequently, he disappeared mysteriously while crossing a forested ridge that separated the territories of Koti and Keonthal, only to reappear as a spirit. This marked the manifestation of *deota* Junga, who then proceeded to displace Jipur, the family deity (who was more in the nature of a *jathera* or ancestor) of the Keonthal *ranas*. By this usurpation Junga became the State deity: the suzerain of all other *deotas* in Keonthal.<sup>37</sup>

### Village Gods and Communities

There were twenty-two important village *deotas* – also called *tikas* (translated locally as ‘sons’ but could also mean princes)<sup>38</sup> – in Keonthal who stood immediately below *deota* Junga. These *deotas*, or *tikas*, of Junga were situated in different territories of Keonthal over which they wielded immense influence through clans of followers. However, even today no celebration or religious function can begin in the shrine of any subordinate *deota* without the permission of *deota* Junga. This consent is granted only after the customary dues from the *tikas* have been deposited in Junga’s treasury.

There existed a close connection between a dominant peasant clan and its *deota*. This association acquired a territorial dimension from the fact that a single clan of Kanet peasants was often concentrated in contiguous villages or

in a specific area.<sup>39</sup> Even the religious rituals and practices in many of the village temples were conducted, not by Brahmans, but by a Kanet peasant acting as a priest.<sup>40</sup> Territory, clan allegiance and religious affiliation, therefore, often overlapped. Festivals at the *deota*'s shrine were occasions on which large, yet well-knit, congregations from adjoining villages assembled. The Kanet peasantry exerted considerable influence over the manner in which the *thakurai* was governed. In order to maintain a political balance between different clans, Kanet clan-leaders occupied, by turns, the important administrative positions of the chiefdom.<sup>41</sup> This periodic re-distribution of public offices probably prevented any single clan from becoming too powerful. But a subtler, more powerful, force bound the Kanet peasantry to the *rana*. This was the spiritual authority of the chief deity Junga over the gods of the different peasant clans.

Ethnographic information recorded in the late nineteenth century about most of the twenty-two *tikas* of Junga, further illustrates the interconnections mentioned above.<sup>42</sup>

#### **Tikas of Deota Junga**

	<b>Junga Cults</b>	<b>Location of Temples</b>	<b>Followers</b>
1	Kalaur	Village Charej, <i>pargana Ratesh</i>	
2	Manuni	Hill of Manun (Manun is Mahadev)	Brahmans of Parali and Koti <i>dhar</i>
3	Kaneti	Village Dagon, by replacing Jipur	Bhaler clan of Kanets
4	Kulthi	Village Kawalath	Chibhar clan of Kanets
5	Dhanun	Village Neog	Brahmans
6	Dum	Village Katian, <i>Phagu tehsil</i>	Subordinate to <i>deota</i> Junga but independent elsewhere
7	Raita	<i>Pargana Parali</i>	Doli Brahmans
8	Chanana	Village Rawal	Image of Junga established by the people
9	Gaun		
10	Biju		
11	Deo Chand		<i>Jathera</i> (ancestor) of the Khanoga clan of Kanets
12	Shaneti		Dispute between two groups of Kanets (Painoi & Shainti).

			The latter established Shaneti
13	Mahanpha	Jatil <i>pargana</i>	Chibhar Kanets
14	Tiru		<i>Jathera</i> (ancestor) of the Jatic sept of Brahmans
15	Khateshwar	Village Koti	Brahmans of Bhakar
16	Chadei		Nawan clan of Kanets
17	Shanei and Jau	Village Koti	
18	Dhuru	Jai <i>pargana</i>	

### Territorial Allegiance

All *deotas* with shrines within the territory of Keonthal were subordinate to Junga.<sup>10</sup> This is of particular significance because some of the larger and more popular folk cults had followers and temples spread across two or more *thakurais*. For example, shrines dedicated to Dum *deota* existed not only in Keonthal and the neighbouring *thakurai* of Kumharsain, but also in the chiefdom of Kotkhai and the State of Bashahr. This could logically have created complications in the hierarchical structure of *deotas* in a State. The problem was, however, overcome by the stratagem of asserting the supremacy of the respective State deity over the different manifestations of Dum *deota* enshrined within their territories. Thus, Dum *deota* in Katin village (no. 6 in the table above) of Phagu *tehsil* in Keonthal was subservient to *deota* Junga, while the Dum *deotas* with temples situated in Kumharsain, were under the suzerainty of their own State deity – Kot Ishwar Mahadev. Similarly, Biju *deota* (no. 10 in the table) seems originally to have been an alien deity subordinate to *deota* Bijat of Jubbal State. After he was brought over by some of his followers who migrated to Keonthal, Biju began to owe allegiance to Junga.<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion

The emergence of monarchical states along the riverine areas of Himachal was accompanied by the Brahmanization of their ruling elite. Territorial expansion was gradually achieved through numerous small, albeit hard-fought battles. But long-term political consolidation was immensely more complex. Large areas and populations in these mountain monarchies tenaciously retained socio-religious traditions and political identities that were diverse and clearly different from the Brahmanized areas. The limited economic resources of the hill states did not allow them to maintain large standing armies to enforce the allegiance of clans and communities located in distant territories. It was here that religion was particularly useful as an instrument of social control. Political incorporation of newly conquered territories was reinforced by ideological

domination. Temporal hierarchies of authority in the State were replicated in the relationship between the deities of the kingdom. Territorial and village gods were hierarchically arranged down to the lowest levels. Their peasant followers, too, were politically and ideologically bound to the *raja* and the State deity. This convergence of politics and religion created a hegemonic system that ultimately outlasted even the monarchies that had initially created them.

### Notes

1. M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs in South India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965 [1952]), p. 167; Gerald D. Berreman, 'Brahmins and Shamans in Pahari Religion', in Edward B. Harper, ed. *Religion in South Asia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), p. 55; J. Gonda, *Visnuism and Sivaism: A Comparison* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1976 [1970]), p. 88; McKim Marriot. 'Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization', in McKim Marriot, ed. *Village India: Studies in the Little Community* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 197. In this context Marriot makes an interesting argument when he says that, 'for understanding why Sanskritic rites are often added onto non-Sanskritic rites without replacing them, the concept of primary or indigenous process of civilization again offers useful guidance. By definition, an indigenous civilization is one whose great tradition originates by "universalization" or a carrying forward of materials which are already present in the little tradition which it encompasses. Such an indigenous great tradition has authority in so far as it contributes a more articulate and refined statement or systematization of what is already there'.
2. David G. Mandelbaum, 'Introduction: Process and Structure in South Asian Religion', in Edward B. Harper, ed. *Religion in South Asia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), p. 11. See also Morton Klass, *Ordered Universes: Approaches to the Anthropology of Religion* (Boulder & Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), p. 57.
3. Mandelbaum, 'Process and Structure', p. 11; N.K. Singh and Joshi Rajendra, eds., *Religion, Ritual and Royalty* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1999), p. 12. For a comparable situation, see Michael Herzfield, 'Pride and Perjury: Time and the Oath in the Mountain Villages of Crete', *MAN* (n.s.), vol. 25, no. 2, June 1990, p. 320. In the context of the mountain villages of Crete, Herzfield sees the 'dialectic' between doctrinal and local concepts of Orthodoxy' as part of a 'more general dialectic between structure and strategy'.
4. For detail, see J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel, *History of the Panjab Hill States*, 2 vols. (Shimla: Department of Languages and Culture, Himachal Pradesh, 1982 [1933]). The process of expansion of the States of Chamba,

Kulu and Mandi has been dealt with in the relevant volumes. The Chamba rulers consolidated their position much before the others. It is argued here that in 'Chamba State alone, with an area of 3,216 square miles, there must have been more than 100 petty Chiefs in ancient times'. Ibid., vol. I, p. 13. Sahilavarman 'brought under his sway all the petty Ranas who still held the lower portion of the Ravi Valley'. Ibid., vol. I, pp. 279, 283.

5. Ibid., vol. II, pp. 378-86 for this process of expansion in Mandi. In Kulu, the struggle that its rulers Sidh Singh (AD 1500) and Bahadur Singh (AD 1532) had to engage in against the *ranas* and *thakurs* remains deeply embedded in folk memory. For a discussion of the details see vol. II, pp. 442-56. For the subjugation of the *thakurs* in Suket State by Bir Sen the founder, see vol. I, pp. 343-45.

6. Chamba town is situated on the Ravi river. Mandi and Sultanpur, the capital towns of the States of Mandi and Kulu respectively are on the banks of the Beas. Bilaspur the capital of Kahlur, and Rampur the winter capital of Bashahr are located next to the Satlej.

7. L.S. Thakur, *Architectural Heritage of Himachal Pradesh* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1996), p. 44. The earliest examples of *nagara* temples, it has been argued, came up along trade routes passing through Himachal and linking Garhwal with Kashmir. These locations, interestingly, are also along the major rivers or important tributaries: Nirmand on the Satlej, Jagatsukh and Bajaura on the Beas, and Hatkoti on the Pabbar, a tributary of the Yamuna.

8. Lakshana Devi is a form of Mahishasurmardini, who in turn is a form of Goddess Shakti.

9. For detail, Thakur, *Architectural Heritage*, passim.

10. J.Ph. Vogel, *Antiquities of Chamba State*, Part I (Calcutta, 1911), p. 40. Vogel writes: 'In Lahaul not a single specimen has come to light; in Pangi only one is known to exist.... In the Churah division comparatively few copper plates are found belonging to the Muhammadan period. In the Ravi valley proper, on the contrary, such documents are exceedingly numerous. The pre-Muhammadan plates all belong to this region'.

11. Thakur, *Architectural Heritage*, pp. 130-31. Chamunda Devi temple was a large proprietor holding land in villages beyond the Ravi valley even though some of the original grants are not available. See also Norbert Peabody, 'Kota Mahajagat or the great universe of Kota: Sovereignty and Territory in eighteenth century Rajasthan', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), vol. 25, no. 1, 1991, pp. 45. Peabody refers to the use of the *mandala* schematic by Tambiah (ed.), *Culture, thought and social action: An anthropological perspective* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 252-86,

which when applied to the polity, creates a 'conception of territory as variable space, control over which diminished as royal power radiated from the centre'.

12. Marriot, 'Little Communities', p. 209. Marriot in his study of Kishangarhi (Haryana) observed that, 'Sanskritic deities of the great tradition play a larger part in the bloc of high castes in Kishangarhi than they do in the devotions of the lower castes'. Even so, the importance of non-Sanskritic beliefs is evident from the facts that only '45 per cent of the deities worshipped even by Brahmans are Sanskritic'. See also Edwin T. Atkinson, *Religion in the Himalayas* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications [Originally published as *The Himalayan Gazetteer*, Chapters VIII, IX and X] 1976), vol. II, p. 141. Atkinson recorded that 'Amongst the peasantry of the highlands the cult of Visnu is little known'. For some detail, see *Chamba State Gazetteer*, 1904, pp. 179, 191. The Rajputs in Chamba town are said to have worshipped Visnu. The *Gazetteer* notes that 'Visnu, though commonly worshipped in Chamba city, has but few shrines in the State'.

13. *Mandi State Gazetteer*, 1920, p. 110. Madho Rao, an incarnation of Visnu was the 'national God of the State' in Mandi. See also *Kangra District Gazetteer (Kulu)*, 1917, p. 63. In Kulu, Lord Raghunath occupied this position. The importance accorded to Visnu in Chamba is apparent from the large temple complex dedicated to Vishnu in the heart of Chamba town.

14. *Chamba State Gazetteer*, 1904, p. 179.

15. *Mandi State Gazetteer*, 1920, p. 110. Vaishnavism is mentioned as 'being clearly an innovation to which only conventional adherence is given'.

16. *Chamba State Gazetteer*, 1904, p. 191. The prevailing tradition suggests that the goddess was of local origin. She is said to have been the daughter of the *raja* who established the town of Chamba and named the town after her.

17. *Mandi State Gazetteer*, 1920, p. 110. The *Gazetteer* notes that, 'Sri Vidya known also as Rajeshwari is depicted as having four arms and holding the top of a man's skull (*pakha* or *pasha*), an elephant goad (*ankush*), and bow (*dhanush*) and an arrow (*ban*) she wears red garments and has a half moon on her forehead. She is supposed to be the giver of wealth and happiness'.

18. *Chamba State Gazetteer*, 1904, pp. 181, 191. Interestingly, the clan god of the Gaddis of Brahmaur (where the kingdom of Chamba originated) is Siva, not Raghunath as in the case of the Rajputs. See also *Mandi State Gazetteer*, 1920, p. 110.

19. *Sirmur State Gazetteer*, 1904, p. 42. The *Gazetteer*, however, observes that 'the direct worship of Shiva is not very popular in the hills...'. Two of the most influential Siva cults in Sirmur and the Shimla Hill States area are those of Mahasu and Shrigul.

20. Gonda, *Visnuism and Sivaism*, p. 95. About Hindu thinkers having little difficulty in 'absorbing anything extraneous into their own system' Gonda

argues that this was often done by 'reinterpreting its mythology, symbolism and metaphysics and accepting its god as a servant or manifestation of their Highest Being'. See also Marriot, 'Little Communities', p. 215. Beals' study of *jatras* in Yadgiri *tahsil* of Karnataka argues that 'The myth and ritual of these *jatras* involve a weaving together of local, regional and pan-Indian traditions...The worshipped deity is regarded as local in origin even though identified with less parochial Hindu and Muslim deities'. Alan R. Beals, 'Conflict and Interlocal Festivals in a South Indian Region' in Edward B. Harper, ed. *Religion in South Asia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), p. 105.

21. This is based on: Klass, *Ordered Universes*, p. 109; Mandelbaum, 'Process and Structure', p. 8; Berreman, 'Brahmins and Shamans', p. 67; Atkinson, *Religion in the Himalayas*, p. 40. Klass argues that such gods deal primarily with Mandelbaum's 'pragmatic' dimension (immediate human problems) of religion than his 'transcendent' (universe-maintaining) religious dimension. But he also emphasises that the importance of these gods lies not so much in their position in a theological order but in 'their role or roles in the particular community's religious universe'. Many of the local practices were conducted not by priests but by *shamans*, who Mandelbaum observes 'deal with the exigencies of daily life, with the immediate and worldly welfare of their clients'. Berreman makes the very interesting argument that 'Shamans and other non-Brahmanical practitioners are not with the great tradition of Hinduism, but they are all-India in spread and hence are part of the pan-Indian Hindu vernacular, or little, tradition'. About the Himalayan peasantry, as he saw it in the early years of the last century, Atkinson wrote: 'Siva and Visnu and their female forms are the principal objects of worship, but with them either as their emanations or as separate divine entities, the representatives of the polydaemonic cults of the older tribes are objects of worship both in temples and in domestic ceremonies'.

22. B.R. Sharma, 'The Institution of the Village Gods in the Western Himalayas', in N.K. Rustomji and Charles Ramble, ed. *Himalayan Environment and Culture* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1990), p. 136. In the Shimla area, a village god was usually worshipped by a cluster of ten or twelve villages called *ghori*.

23. *Mandi State Gazetteer*, 1920, p. 119. See also Colin Rosser, 'A "Hermit" Village in Kulu', in M.N. Srinivas, ed. *India's Villages* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969 [1955]), pp. 80, 81, 88. Rosser's study of the isolated village of Malana in Kulu, where *deota* Jamlu reigned, is quite representative of other village gods, though the hold of Jamlu over his domain is somewhat stronger than most other *deotas*. The village council controls temple affairs in Malana. All land is owned by Jamlu and the Malana peasants consider themselves as tenants of the god. Rosser argues, 'Jamlu can be regarded as the deification of the village, and as the apotheosis of the village'.



24. Robert Redfield, *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture*, Midway Reprint (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989 [1960]) p. 59. These territorial gods might be in some respect, what Robert Redfield calls, 'deities that are intermediate between great and little traditions, being local forms of the one and universalized forms of the other'.

25. *Mandi State Gazetteer*, 1920, p. 120. See also *Kangra District Gazetteer (Kulu)* 1917, p. 61. The *Kangra District Gazetteer* observes that, 'if the people are questioned as to their private worship, they will say that they render dues to the Thakurs and other big foreign gods but for every day wants and troubles they go to their nature deities'.

26. See *Sirmur State Gazetteer*, 1904, p. 38; *Mandi State Gazetteer*, 1920, p. 110. This variation could be marked both in terms of territory and caste. In parts of Himachal there is an interesting overlap even of territory and caste. For example, in Sirmur, the Giri river was taken as the territorial demarcation between orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism and what was then regarded by observers as the 'primitive' type. In Mandi, the gazetteer notes a threefold division of (i) orthodox practices of superior Brahmans, Khatri and some higher Rajput clans, (ii) religion of agricultural groups in areas adjoining the Kangra foothills, and (iii) 'the religion of the hills'.

27. *Kangra District Gazetteer (Kulu and Saraj)*, 1897, p. 41; *Kangra District Gazetteer (Kulu)* 1917, p. 59. Folk tradition is replete with stories based on the familial relationship between village deities and their quarrels and friendships. The very human nature of their grudges is reflected in the hostility that has always existed in Kulu valley, between *deota* Kalinag and *deota* Narayan, because the former eloped with the latter's sister! The *Kangra District Gazetteer* of 1917 puts it aptly: 'The social system is kept up by the rules of caste, by the numerous visits paid by *deotas* to each other accompanied by their people, and by gatherings on occasions of joy and grief.'

28. *Kangra District Gazetteer (Kulu)* 1917, pp. 65-66.

29. Hutchison and Vogel have described in detail the position of the *ranas* and *thakurs* 'who exercised authority, either as independent rulers or under the suzerainty of a paramount power' in the hills. *Punjab Hill States*, vol. I, pp. 12-40. The State of Chamba originated in the small territory of Brahmaur which was in the upper Ravi Valley, vol. I, p. 278. Similarly Bahu Sen the founder of Mandi, after quarrelling with his brother the *raja* of Suket, became the *rana* of Manglaor and thereafter his successors expanded the territory into a large kingdom, vol. I, p. 375. As for the origins of Kulu, Behangamani the founder is believed to have been 'successful in gaining a footing in Upper Bias Valley by overcoming some of the local petty Chiefs. This as we know was the way most of the other Hill States were founded...', vol. I, p. 431.

30. G.W. Trompf, 'Macrohistory and Acculturation: Between Myth and History in Modern Melanesian Adjustments and Ancient Gnosticism', in

*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1989, p. 648. Trompf wonders 'whether the early practice of history ... was originally only possible because of myth'.

31. William Bascom, 'The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives', in Alan Dundes, ed. *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1984), p. 9. Bascom writes that myths are sacred accounts and deal with a remote past in which the main characters are animals, deities and culture heroes. Legends, on the other hand, are secular in nature and narrate stories of humans living in a world that is not very dissimilar from what it is today.

32. G.S. Kirk, 'On Defining Myths', in Dundes, ed. *Sacred Narratives*, p. 58. Kirk has provided an interesting argument about the forms and functions of myths.

33. Cynthia Talbot, 'Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1995, pp. 713, 721. Talbot, however, points out that in pre-modern Europe, ethnicity also developed amongst a widely spread out aristocracy by cutting across territorial boundaries.

34. H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* [Based on the *Census Report for the Punjab, 1883* by Denzil Ibbetson and the *Census Report for the Punjab, 1892* by Edward Maclagan], (Patiala: Punjab Languages Department), 3 volumes, vol. I, p. 444. See also *Keonthal Settlement Report* (Simla District) 1914, Punjab Hill States Agency Records, *Basta* 1, no.15, H.P. State Archives, Shimla, p. 1.

35. *Keonthal Settlement Report*, p. 1.

36. *Simla Hill States Gazetteer (SHSG)* 1910: Jubbal Tributaries.

37. Rose, *Glossary*, vol. I, p. 443. Jipur is now no longer remembered. It is also possible that Rose confused Jipur with Sipur. Sipur *deota*, however, was connected with the Koti *thakurai* rather than Keonthal. Interestingly, his temple is quite near the place where the Kutlehr prince is believed to have disappeared.

38. The term *tika* came to be understood during Mughal times as a mark applied on the forehead (*tika*) that signified the succession of a chieftain to the *gaddi*. Chieftains within the Mughal empire had to obtain the consent of the Mughal emperor before applying the *tika*. Subsequently, the heir-apparent of a hill State came to be addressed as the *tika*.

39. Chetan Singh, *Natural Premises. Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya, 1800-1950* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 210-11.

40. Cf. Klass, *Ordered Universe*, p. 83.

41. *Keonthal Settlement Report*, 1901, para 29. The report mentions six classes of Kanets and notes that, 'The head of these tribes used to be the *wazir* in the State by turn'.

42. Rose, *Glossary*, vol. I, pp. 445-50.

43. If, hypothetically, Keonthal had been incorporated by conquest into a larger State (as happened to many *thakurais* in earlier times), then *deota* Junga would probably have been subservient to a deity of Brahmanical Hinduism.

44. Rose, *Glossary*, vol. I, p. 449; *Simla District Gazetteer*, 1904, p. 39; Nadia Lovell, *Locality and Belonging* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 54-55. In the area of Punar, which was added much later by the British to Keonthal State, the *deotas* naturally had no history of being subordinate to Junga. Within Punar, nevertheless, the territories of different *deotas* had been historically delineated. Nihagu *deota* of Jaili village presided over Agla Punar while Pichhla Punar was under Baneshar *deota* of Chohag village. The establishing of a shrine to their deity in a new place may be one of the means by which the followers also laid out a territorial claim. This clearly reiterates the connection between clan, deity and territory.

