

Embedded Meanings An Analysis of the Role of the Raja in the Kulu Dussehra

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The focus of this paper revolves around the role of the Raja in Kulu Dussehra, an event that has long enjoyed the status of a 'state festival'.¹ In the process one will be looking at a series of rituals and ceremonies that constitute, and are integral to, the performance of that role on the part of the Raja. One will also have to enter upon a rich description of the festival in some part, since detail is of the essence for understanding some of the 'statements' that are made through it and the implications that it holds. The description of some of the ritual acts will take centre stage, for rituals, as we well understand, are rich in resonances.² For the purposes of the present study, as elsewhere, they would be seen to contain religious and cultural meanings, marking off and sanctifying sacred spaces, establishing or confirming social relations, articulating issues of rank and power. Authority, including in this case the authority of the Raja of Kulu, being central to ritual power, reference will be seen as constantly being made as Mubayi, (2005: 16-17) puts it to 'political linkages and hierarchies of privilege and status', as much as to 'structures of order and authority'.³

I

The Dussehra of Kulu is visibly different, in so many ways, from the festival of the same name that is celebrated in large parts of northern India. Rama is here, as elsewhere, the central figure, and it is his triumph and glory in all its plenitude that one is reminded of, year after year, through the celebrations. But there are no enactments, such as the Ramalila here, that precede the event; the celebrations that stretch over seven days begin here on the very day that they

have ended in the plains; no great effigies of Ravana and his kinsmen are raised and then consigned to flames. The spectacle takes another form here. The entire area that constitutes the town of Kulu—the former Raghunathpur, later and now known as Sultanpur,⁴ in the north, on the other side of the Sarwari stream that is a tributary of the Beas, and the sprawling chaugan-grounds of Dhalpur⁵ towards the south—springs to life in a different manner. From all directions, the 'gods' of Kulu, village *deotas* and *devis*⁶, taking the form of cast-in-metal 'masks' or images, converge upon the spaces of the town, their richly decorated *ratha*-palanquins, sometimes simple *karadu*-baskets, having been carried on the shoulders of their followers over long distances on foot. There is rich colour everywhere, and the heady aroma of marigolds. Music fills the air, for no *deota* or *devi* travels without a band of dedicated musicians and essential functionaries; and at any given time, scores of small 'processions' can be seen to be moving about. Rama, in the form of a small metal image designated as Raghunath ji, the 'state deity', installed in a shrine⁷ within the royal complex of buildings in Sultanpur, is whom the *deotas* come visiting, their carriages being first directed to those quarters before they settle in their assigned places in the Dhalpur plain. A series of events is set into motion from the very first day, in which the Raja occupies a central place: ritual worship of Raghunath ji's image inside the shrine first; the formal journey of the image in a procession to Dhalpur where an elaborate *ratha* is already in place; the *yatra* of the image in the *ratha* pulled by devotees headed by the Raja; the transfer of the image to another temporary residence, the 'camp'; the performance of daily worship there for the next few days; the rounds that the Raja keeps making of the *chaugan*-plain visiting the *deotas*, or their coming to visit him; the climax of the celebrations in the form of a 'battle' prior to which animals are ritually sacrificed; the return of the triumphant forces back to the permanent abode of Raghunathji in Sultanpur, and the departure of the gathered *deotas* to their own homes and shrines. There is a sense of closure; 'sacredness' departs, if only to return. But, during the celebrations, in significant ways, the entire town of Kulu turns into some 'epic space' year after year; the series of events that constitute the Dussehra of Kulu become a 'performance of magnitude'.

II

It would be necessary to look at many of these things in close detail. Before that, however, as a reminder to oneself and for establishing a framework of related references, it might be appropriate to recall some like events and practices followed elsewhere in other parts of India. There is thus the great *ratha-yatra* of Puri, the so-called 'car festival', spread over nine-days in the month of Asharh (June-July), with enormous throngs of devotees converging upon the town to celebrate an 'event' in the life of the 'Lord of the World', Jagannath.⁸ Going back to the 13th century, the festival has remained, despite serious vicissitudes in the fortunes of Orissa, and frequent political disruptions, so central to the life and the people of Orissa that it can be seen as a 'state festival'. Its celebration is inextricably bound and the Raja of Puri is the first servant of the Lord. While great religious fervour seems to run through every heart on this occasion, it is the Raja who takes on time-honoured tasks: *seba* in local parlance. Even as the three sacred effigies of Jagannath, Subhadra and Balbhadra are taken out and placed in the great chariots, with designated priests working their way through milling crowds and performing an incredible number of complex rituals, the Raja is 'summoned' by the deities. He arrives, dressed in full regalia, but then proceeds to sweep, like a menial servant, the spaces around the mobile sanctum with a broom—the famous *chera-pahaura* ritual. Then, as the *rathas* are readied to move towards the Gundicha temple, and musicians and dancers begin to perform in front of the *rathas*, which are like the Lord's court, it is the Raja who becomes the first among the chariot-pullers. Service is his, but so is the honour.

Of a different order, and certainly observed on a significantly smaller scale, is the 'state festival' of Dussehra as celebrated in the tribal region of Bastar. Well recorded by Nandini Sundar (1997: 47-76) the festivities here centre around the figure of the great tutelary deity of the royal family, Danteshwari Devi, but there are aspects of the momentous event that remind one of other places, other celebrations. Large crowds of people assemble; weapons are worshipped; animals are sacrificed; a chariot is prepared and drawn. In all this, the Raja of Bastar features with prominence: going out barefoot to receive the goddess who travels from her own shrine, 57 miles away, and bringing her to be installed, temporarily, in her new abode in the capital; his offering the sword-sceptre of the state to her; his ritual 'abdication' of the throne only to return on a big chariot

of the goddess, for being re-enthroned. There is enthusiasm and fervour, participation and enactment, all in a collective invocation of racial memories.

In the Rajasthani state of Kota, cast as it is in the classical Rajput mould, Dussehra is only one of the many festivals, but the pageantry that forms part of it, and the series of time-honoured rituals that accompany the celebrations, are marked by great lustre as observed by HS Metzger; and Maharao Brijraj Singh (n.d. 45-70), vast crowds assemble; fireworks are set off; cannons boom in the distance; priests and *acaryas* bustle about with sacred tasks in hand. But at the centre of every part of the celebration, has always been the ruler of Kotah, the Maharao: he appears seated atop the state elephant, walks in front of his troops, performs the ritual worship of weapons and steeds and vehicles of war, participates in all the prayers offered to the *kula-devis*. The evil figure of Ravana remains a challenge, but Rama has an ally, and a devout follower, in the ruler.

At Ramnagar, where the titular 'Maharajas of Benares' have ruled since 1752, the joyous celebration of Rama's life and deeds spreads over a full thirty days and takes the form of an enactment—the great Ramalila, based upon the text of Tulsi's *Ramacaritamanasa*—on a scale that has few parallels.⁹ Inspired and 'presided over' in so many ways by the Maharaja in person, the event transforms the entire space of the city into sacred space, the performance covering almost the whole town, action shifting from place to place as days pass and events unfold. There are the most elaborate of preparations: the selection of persons who will be transformed into mythical characters, the construction of sets, the worship of accessories including the sacred *pothis* from which the text would be recited, the gathering together of funds, and the like. And at each step the Maharaja is there in person: seated atop an elephant with three sets of texts in front of him, regulating the ebb and flow of the performance, becoming in turn king, god, and actor. Everything culminates eventually into the annihilation of the great effigies of Ravana and his kinsmen. But throughout all this, even though this is a festival of the people, the Maharaja remains at the very heart of things, always commanding attention: enjoying privileges as spectator and leader, performing ritual service, interacting with the massive audience and becoming one with the crowd.

It would take long to examine each phenomenon in detail, and to work out the manner, in which in each, is reflected structures and ideas that go well beyond what is visible on the surface. Everywhere

there is mass participation and great fervour, but also linkages, those 'hierarchies of privilege and status' that one spoke of. What is outwardly only a religious celebration or event, contains also at its heart elements that are at once political and social and cultural. Rituals and enactments contain pointers, roles affirm identities, participation binds. There is much that is embedded.

III

As can easily be seen, there are common threads that run through state festivals or celebrations, and similarities are not hard to find. But the history of each place is different, and is differently invoked; the manner in which these festivals came to be established also remains varied. Very little is recorded, unfortunately, of the early history of Kulu. But myths, and traditional accounts, about the founding of the state survive, and continue to influence the way in which matters like origins, power relationships, issues of legitimacy, et al. are perceived, even if not expressly so stated.¹⁰ One of the myths that have endured here is the manner in which the kingdom came to be founded.¹¹ No dates are mentioned. But the 'ancestor', the founder of the dynasty—to which the present 'Raja' of Kulu belongs—is believed to have descended from a family that used to rule in the Haridwar region. Named Bihangmani Pal, this cadet of that royal family moved into these hills, according to traditional accounts, without much resource or following. However, a local Brahmin recognized in him a 'true king', having recognized the presence of great, auspicious symbols—*lakṣaṇas*—betokening royalty on the soles of his feet, and prophesied that he would one day rule over these lands. Soon after, as if in fulfillment of this prophecy, young Bihangmani Pal won the favour of a powerful local tribal deity, the goddess Hidimba of Dungri, Manali. She appeared to the young outsider first in the guise of a frail, hapless woman whom he helped with a load that she herself was unable to carry on her head. Greatly pleased with his kind and selfless disposition, the goddess then revealed herself in her true, colossal form, asked Bihangmani Pal to climb on to her shoulders, and promised to confer upon him sovereignty over the entire extent of the land that his eyes could take in. Thus blessed by the powerful goddess, Bihangmani Pal brought all that territory, mostly the upper Beas valley, under his control, adding to his own prowess and efforts the spiritual authority thus conferred upon him. A legitimate dynasty came to be founded.

Hidimba—one recognizes a classical connection here, for the great Pandava hero, Bhima, is said to have married a 'flesh-eating demoness' by that name—came to occupy a special place, as benefactor and protector, in the founder's heart and that of all his descendants from then on.

The second event of relevance, and one within reasonable reach of history, goes back to the middle of the 17th century when, under Raja Jagat Singh¹²—the family title had changed from Pal to Singh somewhere in the fifteenth century—Vaiṣṇavism, and the worship of Rama as Raghunath ji, came to these hills.¹³ Local legend connects this with a series of developments beginning with the suicide of a Brahmin whose daughter, or a bunch of uncommon pearls in another version, the Raja had coveted. Before killing himself in despair, however, the Brahmin placed a curse upon the ruler who, from then on could neither eat nor drink, seeing worms and blood in everything that was placed before him. Seeking deliverance from this state, he turned to a Vaiṣṇava saint, the Bairagi Krishnadasa Payahari, who lived not far from the Raja's capital town of Naggar then. The Bairagi told the Raja that his redemption could come only if an image of Rama were to be brought to Kulu from Ayodhya. Complicated but determined action followed: a contingent was dispatched to Ayodhya, the image was surreptitiously 'lifted' from the Treta Nath temple, some of the priests of that temple¹⁴ travelled with the image towards Kulu, the image was personally received by the Raja at a place that was at some distance from his capital, and then, at an appropriate time, conveyed to the capital town for being formally installed there.¹⁵ With the blessings of Rama, the ruler was cured of his affliction; great celebrations followed; Raghunath ji was declared as the state deity from then on; and the ruler took on the role of the chief *sewak*, or servitor, of the deity, assuming for himself the designation of 'Dewan' or deputy.

Other developments, having a bearing upon our understanding of the Dussehra of Kulu, followed soon after. Nothing is firmly recorded, but it would seem that Jagat Singh conceived at this time a grand design: that of instituting a great state festival that would serve several purposes at once.¹⁶ Once every year, on the occasion of the Dussehra, all the 365—a legendary number—tribal or folk gods and godlings of the region, the *deotas* and *devis* to whom the local populace owed unquestioning allegiance, would be asked, by royal decree, to come to the capital town to pay homage to the state deity and partake of the celebrations in which the Raja, apart from

the temple-priests, was a principal officiant. In this manner, the supremacy of the Vaiṣṇava strain of classical Hinduism would be endorsed; the Raja's power would be seen as reaching far and wide; centres of local power and influence would be subordinated to central authority; integration would result; segments of population living in far-flung areas of the kingdom would be brought in contact with the mainstream; opportunities of exchanges of different kind, social and economic, would be opened up.

It is doubtful if the issue of one royal decree would have sufficed to achieve all that was intended, and, even though nothing is recorded, one can imagine that the processes through which the state festival was established, and compliance with the decree ensured, must have been complex. There must have been give and take in the negotiations leading to agreement; the power of granting rent-free tenures in exchange for services must have been used;¹⁷ local loyalties must have come into play; social and cultural tensions must naturally have surfaced; accommodation would have been made between the Raja's own old loyalties to his family-deity or the local *deotas*, and his newly-acquired faith in the great Vaiṣṇava deity;¹⁸ hard-won exceptions to the rule of attendance—*deotas* like Jamlu of Malana, Bhekhli Devi, Parashar Rishi, still do not attend the festival and only send token tribute from a distance—must have had to be conceded.¹⁹ Much of this series of processes remains obscured from our view, however, the documentation from the region being thin. But, in the final analysis, the Dussehra did come to be established as the state festival of Kulu, and more or less in the same form in which it is celebrated today. For upwards of three hundred and fifty years it has so stayed, with its core and its essence intact, except for two recorded occasions when the continuity was disrupted.²⁰

IV

What happens during the week-long Dussehra festival at Kulu and its environs, the sequence of events that make it what it is, needs to be described—this is where rich description comes in—before the role that the Raja plays in it can be properly understood. The description that follows is based on my personal observations of the Dussehra over several seasons, and inquiries in the field in the present, but it might not be far from what things were like in the past.²¹ As it is now, in and around the Dussehra, event follows well-defined event, even as seeming confusion, caused in part by milling crowds that

converge upon the town during these days, reigns. In a manner of speaking, there is a clear 'narrative' that everyone who is part of it understands: it is the outsider who needs to piece it all together to be able to comprehend it.

Briefly put, as things proceed, designated priests are consulted at the outset for determining the day and time, within a known framework, for the opening of festivities. In the days gone by, it was the Raja who would seek this consultation and the determination; after independence and merger of the state, the government set up a formal committee, and the responsibility of fixing the date was vested in it; however, for pragmatic reasons, the responsibility came to rest again with the 'Raja' of Kulu through his being appointed as the Chairman of that committee.²² The proper time determined, messages are prepared and dispatched, in the name of Raghunath ji, to all the *deotas* of the region, including the goddess Hidimba of Dungri, Manali, asking them to attend the festival. There is some difference, however: the missive sent to Hidimba is in the nature of a request, a humble invitation, she being regarded and referred to as the *Dadi*, grandmother of the royal household; to all the other *deotas*, couched as the letter might be in polite and deferential language, it is in the nature of a royal order—formerly referred to, in feudal terms, as *begar hukam*, according to one informant, Pandit Chandrashekhar²³—reminding them of their obligation. The *deotas*, the term includes, it is widely understood, *devis* and *rishis* and *nagas* and *birs* enjoy different ranks, and bear a remarkably wide range of names that go back to diverse sources²⁴—classical, like *Adi Brahma*, *Shesh Naga*, *Tripurasundari*, *Bhima*, *Jamadagni*; classical but now localized, like *Bijli Mahadeo*, *Pancha Bir*; purely local like *Phungani Devi*, *Gauhri Deota*, *Dhumal Naga*,—but each one is subject to the same command. Once the information is received, the *deota* begins preparing for the journey to Kulu. At each shrine, the *mohras* or metal 'masks' representing the *deota* are taken out, polished and decorated with flower garlands and colourful textiles; a small *puja* comprising often a sacrifice, is performed; and the *deota* mounted on his *ratha*-palanquin or *karadu*-basket, is ready for the journey, borne on shoulders across long and sometimes very rough terrain. A procession is formed: the group of the devotees, called the *haryan*,—of the *deota* could consist of anything between 25 and 50 persons, but essential to the group is the *pujari* or ministering priest, the *Gur* or the shamanic medium, the *kardar* or manager of the affairs of the *deota*'s shrine, and several *bajantris*, musicians traditionally attached

to the shrine, carrying and playing upon instruments like simple drums, *shehnai*-clarinets, and *narsingha*-trumpets. Coming from different directions, the *rathas* of the *deotas* start descending upon the Dhalpur plain, with the *Gur* leading, carrying an iron *dharach*-ladle in his hand filled with smoking incense, and stopping occasionally to utter prophesies on behalf of the *deota* or to answer queries or *puchh*²⁵ made by devotees about the future.

At this very time, in the royal complex of buildings at Sultanpur, within which is located the small, unpretentious shrine of Raghunath ji, there is ceaseless activity, involving initially the Raja and the priests of the temple. Some things have preceded this day: the *sair puja*—part of the 'big worship', celebrating the winter crop, in which walnuts and *doob*-grass figure—has been conducted, the *puja-paddhati* being carefully followed, and the Raja being assisted in the *shodasha-upacharas* by the priests. The family deity of the royal household, the *kula-devi*, whose black stone image—the goddess standing triumphant atop the prostrate body of Shiva—is installed in a shrine within the palace, has received homage to the accompaniment of the recitation of the *Chandi-patha*. On the very first day of the Dussehra, however, the *Vijaya-dashami*, intense public activity begins. The Raja is constantly in and out of his palace and the temple—the two are connected through a door accessible only to the royal family or the priests—throughout the day. Early in the day, having performed the usual personal worship in his private chambers, he offers homage, following time-honoured Rajput usage, to his weapons and the emblems of his state. Then, for participating in all the religious ceremonies, he presents himself before Raghunath ji, the 'lord of his kingdom', who is bathed and clothed, and offered food in preparation for the day. At the outer gate leading to the courtyard of the temple, the Raja also receives and honours a steed, the *Narsingh-ji ki ghodi*, recalling the ancient ceremony of burning incense in front of the royal mount, but also invoking the blessings of *Narasimha* who, in a layering of identities, is both the classical man-lion incarnation of Vishnu and a warrior-hero locally worshipped as *Narsing-Bir*.²⁶ Soon, the *deotas* start arriving, one by one, carried in their shoulder-borne *rathas*, at the Raghunath temple, and render homage by stopping in front of Raghunath ji's image and gently tipping towards it as if bowing. The Raja is not present in the Raghunath temple at the time of each *deota*'s visit: he, or representative members of his family, being present in the adjoining

palace to receive the *deotas* who make their way towards it after having offered homage to Raghunath ji. The *rathas* or *karadus*, carried and accompanied by their respective followers, traverse the large outer courtyard, pass through the main gate and the narrow passage which leads to the inner courtyard, and there 'present themselves'—*hazri* or attendance is the word used—before the Raja, tipping in respect to the temporal master, while the Raja offers them reverence on his own part. On *deota*'s behalf a token amount—however small the amount, it is referred to as a *nazrana* or tribute to the liege lord—is offered, and duly noted in a register by a functionary; in return, the Raja makes a small offering—a recognition of the spiritual status of the *deota*—which is placed in a small cloth bag that is then tied to one of the poles of the *ratha*-palanquin. The *deota* departs soon thereafter, the *Gur* leading the group of devotees, music playing, the *ratha* sometimes tipping, as if in greeting or embrace, towards that of another *deota* on his way to the royal complex.

The big event in this part of the day is the arrival of Hidimba. There is much anticipation. While the request had gone to her well ahead of time, asking her to come for the Dussehra, she is now to be formally received. This reception takes place on the outskirts of the town, at the spot called Ram Shila on the bank of the Beas, where a representative of the Raja remains personally present, with the royal staff, the silver-topped *chhari*, in hand. Having journeyed long from Dugri, Manali, and having been greeted with honour, the goddess proceeds straight to the Raghunath temple to offer the customary homage, and then makes her way through the winding streets to the royal palace, her *Gur*—an awe-inspiring, big-bodied figure, with wide eyes and long tongue—walking in front carrying a *dharach*-ladle. Her arrival at the palace, however, is quite an event, for there is great commotion. As her approach is announced, all the members of the family leave their chambers, as if vacating the palace for her, and taking cover behind a carved doorway²⁷ out of fear and reverence. Hidimba, alongwith her *Gur* and other *pujaris*, then goes in and occupies the main chamber of the palace, and no member of the royal household comes out of hiding till she, through the *Gur*, calls out for her *potru* (grandchild), so the Raja is addressed by her with affection—to come to her presence. This is seen as a token of her being pleased with the way things have gone. The Raja appears before her, seeks her blessings, and addresses queries about the future to the *Gur*, his *puchh*, as if to ensure that the entire Dussehra

celebrations will proceed without hindrance or impediment. This over, Hidimba leaves the palace, for the time for the moving out of Rama, as Raghunath ji, from his temple abode to the 'field of battle', approaches.

Raghunath ji, however, does not proceed all by himself. On his behalf, an order is sent to the Raja—once again, a silver-topped *chhari* or staff, is sent in token of a royal command—asking him to join the *jaleb*, which is the procession that stands for the lord's army. The Raja presents himself; the divine weapons are worshipped; the image is placed, with all ceremony, in a palanquin; and the procession sets off, large crowds of people, and many *deotas* in their *rathas*, joining. The Raja, dressed in full regalia and riding, in recognition of his own royal status, in a shoulder-borne *sukhpal*-palanquin, along with all the richly-attired male members of his immediate and extended family who are on foot, follows the deity's palanquin, but at the head of the procession, as it moves through the winding lanes of Sultanpur and crosses the Sarwari stream for reaching the Dhalpur plain, are the *Narsinghi ki ghodi* and Hidimba's *ratha*. It is a rich, joyous sight, great enthusiasm writ upon faces, and loud notes of music—countless drums and *shehnais* and *narsinghas* all playing—filling the air.

The immediate aim is to reach the large chariot—a proper wooden *ratha* with large wheels—that is already stationed in one part of the Dhalpur *chaugan*, completely covered with colourful textiles and topped by a *kalasha*-like member: a truly mobile shrine that, despite its comparatively smaller size, brings to mind one of the great *rathas* of the Jagannath triad at Puri in distant Orissa. Once here, the image of Raghunath ji is to be installed inside the chariot, and it is the Raja who is called upon by the priests to do this. After performing the ritual *parikrama* of the chariot, sacred water in hand, the Raja does this; then comes the moment that everyone in the large crowds that have gathered is waiting for: the pulling of the *ratha* of Raghunath ji. Large ropes attached to the chariot are the means, and considerable force is needed to pull the chariot, but it is the Raja who first holds the rope in his hands standing at the head of a team of persons that includes members of the royal family, men of prominence, and, now, some government officials. As the first movement of the chariot takes place, a great shout goes up; virtual melee ensues; the *deotas* who have gathered all around also move behind the *ratha*. But, slowly, the *ratha* reaches its destination, another part of the Dhalpur *chaugan* where a tented enclosure, the *chhauni* or encampment, has

been set up for Raghunath ji. He will sojourn here for the next few days. The Raja helps move the images from the chariot to inside the enclosure, working along with the priests—not everyone is allowed to touch or approach the idols from this close—and formally installs them in their new abode. As for himself, he moves to his own temporary home for the next few days: a tented enclosure set up at a slight distance from that of his deities. He will return to his palace complex only when all the celebrations are concluded for that year.

The days that follow are filled with a routine. The *deotas* have all occupied their allocated spaces on the *chaugan*, the allocation taking into account, as best as is possible, past histories, issues of rank and precedence, the size of the *ratha*-palanquin, the numbers of the *haryan*-attendants who accompany the *deota*. This is where they will stay except when, on occasions, they move out either to go and pay homage to Raghunath ji in his camp, visit one another, or to appear at the 'court' of the Raja in his camp. At Raghunath ji's camp, the customary temple ceremonies are regularly performed: the images are taken out at appropriate times from the makeshift sanctum sanctorum and installed on their throne for everyone to view, great tasteful ceremony accompanying each step. The idols are lustrated and clothed and adorned, the Raja assisting all the time, and performing a range of services: applying *tilak* marks and unguents on the bodies, arranging flowers, sounding or playing upon a bell when *kirtana*-chanting takes place, waving a flywhisk over the heads of the idols, standing solemnly with a staff in hand, like a common servitor in attendance. The deities are served food, offered *bhog*, at suitable times after which large groups of devotees are fed—a *dham*, in Pahari usage—from the *rasoi* or kitchen of the lord, as a token of his great favour. The Raja receives his share of the food.

But, each of these days, the Raja has other functions to perform apart from being attendant upon Raghunath ji. Each day, at an appointed hour, he mounts a *sukhpal*-palanquin, dressed in regal clothing, and, followed by several functionaries of the royal household, goes around the *chaugan* plain, negotiating the large crowds and the temporary bazaars that come up, the festival having turned also into an enormous *mandi* or trading mart.²⁸ But he heads essentially towards the spots where the *deotas* are camping: inquiring if all is well, receiving homage, offering respects in return. This *jaleb* procession as it is called, mirrors, on a small scale and as is appropriate to the occasion, the kind of tour that a ruler would have undertaken of his *riyasat* or *thakurai* in olden times. Not much is

transacted, but the routine is observed with strictness. During these days, towards the evening, the Raja also receives visitors in his camp, seated regally attired as if holding a *darbar*: here dignitaries come, *deotas* put in an appearance, performers come to perform and entertain. Troupes of actors used to appear here in earlier days coming from places as distant as Mathura, informants say.²⁹ Members of the public also come to greet their 'Raja Sahib'. But nothing comes in the way of the Raja presenting himself before Raghunath ji every evening at *sandhya* time, when the deities are formally put to bed only to be woken up the next morning and installed on their thrones again. There, in the deities' camp, an occasional performance is also held in the night with the Raja watching along with others: a 'Chandravali' dance, an enactment of Durga riding her tiger mount, a circular *rasa* performed by men dressed up as women.³⁰

Thus days go by, with no specific event attached to each. It is as if these are days spent upon the gathering of energies before the final assault. Finally, it is time for Raghunath ji to spring into action. Just before that, however, on the day referred to locally as *mohalla*, the goddess is to be propitiated much as she was, in popular belief, propitiated and invoked by Rama before the attack upon Lanka. On that evening, the Raja of Kulu stations himself outside the camp of Raghunath ji, in an attitude of subservience, resting his hands upon the silver knob of a *chhari*-staff, waiting for the goddess Tripurasundari of Naggar, the *kula-devi* of the royal family, to arrive, and lend her energies to the campaign. On the day of assault, the image of Raghunath ji is placed once again in the chariot, for the *ratha* to be pulled by devotees and taken some distance towards the river-bed. On this occasion, five animals are to be sacrificed, the traditional *panchabali*,³¹ in the honour of divine powers. The Raja does not always participate personally in the sacrifice; however, he confers the honour of beheading the buffalo, the largest and most difficult of the animals in the *panchabali*, upon a member of the royal family. The moment when the gleaming blade lands upon the neck of the designated animal is dramatic, and not for the faint-hearted. But a large and curious crowd watches the entire proceeding with eagerness. Hidimba has accompanied the *ratha* up to this site, and it is her *Gur* who receives the severed head of the buffalo as *prasada*. This done, a token, perfunctory battle is fought: no great effigies are burnt, but arrows are shot in the air upon some small masks that represent the enemy, and a pile of brush is set to fire recalling the destruction of Lanka. Shouts of victory go up, and

Raghunath ji, accompanied this time by Sita whose image is placed in the chariot by his side, sets off on the return journey, the *ratha* pulled by devotees and taken back to the same point in the *chaugan* from where it had originally started.

It is time for the triumphant troops to return. The images are transferred to a palanquin, and the Raja walks ahead of the procession as it forms, till the temple in Sultanpur is reached. With great reverence, the image of Raghunath ji is re-installed in the temple where the women of the royal household receive the heroes with honour, applying saffron marks on their foreheads, and showering flowers. An *utsava* or celebration is organized in the courtyard of the temple, and the *rajyabhisheka*—the ceremony of formal enthronement—of Raghunath ji takes place in the presence of the entire royal household. Meanwhile, the *deotas*, including Hidimba who sets off for Dungri, Manali instead of accompanying the procession to the temple, begin leaving for their own respective places. The Dussehra is over.

V

In this entire event, spread as it is over several days, and continued as it has over upwards of three centuries, there are things that seem evident, and visible. It is easy to see for example that the role of the Raja in the whole range of celebrations and ceremonies is central. Raghunath ji apart, and in some ways even more than Raghunath ji, he is pivotal to the Dussehra. He seems to be everywhere in person: moving between the palace complex and the Raghunath temple, between Sultanpur and Dhalpur, moving in front of the chariot and standing in attendance at the entrance of the deity's camp, offering worship, dispatching invitations, receiving, disbursing, walking, pulling, riding, issuing commands, serving food, joining hands in prayer, and plying the flywhisk. The present 'Raja' of Kulu, Maheshwar Singh,³² has for years been playing these roles sensitively, with gravity and devotion. But one can imagine his situation, his place in the scheme of things, located as he is in today's times, with no real power as Raja, no subjects to command, and little to govern, as being materially different from that of his forebears. There are no grounds to doubt that the earlier Rajas were also devout men who saw the Dussehra as a religious festival, celebrating the glory of Rama, instituted in a historical moment, and then continued. But engaged as they must have been as rulers with issues of power and

authority, the everyday reality of governance, the creation and preservation of social balances, they must also have seen the Dussehra as a political and socio-economic institution that became, over time, a meaningful part of awareness of the people of the state. In the manner in which it was organized and meant to proceed, then, there would have been seen a clear opportunity to embed messages, and make statements that mattered. This opportunity appears to have been seized with care and foresight.

A complete understanding of the entire structure of the festival, as it evolved over time—and one can imagine that it would have been thought through in stages—might elude us, especially because documentation remains thin all through the past. But one can at least begin to read meanings, taking some prominent junctures or practices that form part of the chain of events, as examples. There is, thus, the sending out of messages to the *deotas*, making known the date of holding of the Dussehra, and asking them to assemble for it in the capital town. Apart from the difference noted earlier between the humble 'invitation' to the goddess Hidimba and the virtual command to the other *deotas*, there is the fact of the missive being issued by the Raja as the Dewan of Raghunath ji. This was no simple announcement of a festival, it was a reminder. The spiritual authority rested clearly with the deity, but the temporal executor of the wishes of Raghunath ji was the Raja, and this could possibly not have been lost upon the receivers of the 'invitation'. All that went into the negotiations between the local power of the *deotas* and the central authority of the Raja, or the fact that the *deotas*, for all their spiritual sway over the local populace, were essentially tenure-holders from the state, might have been in the past. But, year after year, the *deotas* were reminded of their obligation to the Raja, their status being underscored through their being asked to 'attend'. It is in this light that one can see the practice of the *deotas* visiting first, upon their arrival in Kulu, Raghunath ji in his temple to offer homage, and then proceeding to present themselves before the Raja inside his palace complex: the required *hazri* which was duly noted in a register by a functionary.

The Raja's relationship with the goddess Hidimba is of another order, but holds clear meaning. The entire series of events comprising the invitation to her requesting her to come, her being received at the Ramshila on the outskirts of the town by a representative of the Raja carrying the state *chhari*, the palace being vacated by members of the royal household for being occupied by the goddess, the

waiting for her commanding the Raja to come to her presence, is something that could easily have been seen as being in the private domain, expression of a personal relationship with the *Dadi* of the family. But, as things unfold, it is something that all and sundry are made witness to, everything being done in public view. Clearly, there is design behind this, for the special honour accorded to the goddess Hidimba is an emphatic, yearly reminder of the origins of the state, and the manner in which 'legitimate' power came to rest in the dynasty through its founder in these hills. That the authority that the first Raja, and therefore his descendants, came to possess had a spiritual basis, apart from that which comes through conquest or other means, must have been seen as a message with a meaning for the subjects of the state.

Again, the exchanges that take place when the *deotas* come visiting Raghunath ji and the Raja are replete with subtle meanings. The offerings that are made by the *deota* might be trivial in material terms—a few coins, a handful of corn, a bunch of greens, and the like—but they are in the nature essentially of a *nazrana*, yearly tribute in feudal terms. But, tribute having been formally paid, it is the turn of the Raja to render homage to the *deotas*, in recognition of their 'divinity' or the spiritual power they without question wield over their 'own' people, within their own respective areas. Something akin to a circular relationship can be seen to exist. The gift that the Raja makes on this occasion to each *deota* might not be of the nature of tribute, but it is an offering that betokens humility, a lack of the arrogance that comes naturally to holders of temporal power. Upon the *haryan*, body of devoted followers of each *deota*, the gesture would clearly register, and leave an imprint. One sees this yet again in the practices followed in the camp at Dhalpur. The Raja, as sovereign, or as the embodiment of Narasimha (Narsing Bir?) moves about day after day in the *jaleb* procession, but each time he would stop, solicitously, before the temporary abodes in which the *deotas* live on the *chaugan* grounds, inquiring about their well-being, offering to be of help in case of need.

In the course of all the ceremonies and rituals conducted at the temple, or the 'camp', of Raghunath ji, the Raja appears again and again as a humble servitor of the lord, the first among his *sewaks*: offering prayers, performing menial tasks, standing guard. Everyone sees the roles as being reversed, the ruler turning into a servant. But, personal devotion and the feelings of the Raja apart—and these elicit natural respect—there is significance even in this stance, for no one

reads the message wrong. The Raja still remains, in the eyes of everyone, a Raja. In fact, he gains in prestige, and power, as he goes through this reversed role, for the spiritual authority of Raghunath ji is seen as descending upon, or being vested in, him. He remains no longer the Dewan of the lord; he turns into his alter ego.

It is in manners like this that, over generations of time, the Raja of Kulu seems to have been seen and perceived by the people of the state. In their eyes the Dussehra of Kulu would be unthinkable without him, and without his playing the roles that he does. There is reassurance, and meaning, in these continuities. And whenever there is a break in this continuity, a rupture, as happened in 1972 when the Raja's role or powers were questioned by 'secular' authority and violence resulted,³³ something goes seriously amiss; things go askew. But that is a story in itself, and needs to be told another time.

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NOTES

1. The institution of the Dussehra as a state festival is credited to Jagat Singh (A.D. 1637-1672). For a detailed discussion of the coming of Vaiṣṇavism

to Kulu and the strategies employed by Raja Jagat Singh to ensure its establishment on a firm footing, see, Goswamy, Karuna (1968: 69-70).

2. Performative in nature, rituals introduce meaning, energy, persuasion and encouragement into the functioning of society as a collective. Dramatizing myths, rituals display and stabilize existing social relations as well as inculcate values. The resonances thus are many. See also, Rappaport, Roy (1999: 104-38); Block, Maurice (1989: 46-88).
3. Also see, Milner, Murray jr. (1994).
4. The older name of Kulu seems to have been Raghunathpur. This is the form in which the town is referred to in the *Bahis* of the Pandas of Kulu at Haridwar. My attention was drawn to this by Professor BN Goswamy who in the course of his own researches had seen the *bahis* of Pt. Som Nath Chaklan at Haridwar. All entries made by the Rajas of Kulu mention Raghunathpur. Some of these entries go back to the 80's of the 18th century in the time of Raja Pritam Singh of Kulu. The time from which it has been called Sultanpur is not clear.
5. The old name of the segment of the town now called Dhalpur, where all the administrative offices are located, appears to have been called 'Rani ki Ropay'. The reference obviously is to this area having been gifted by the queen and these were once rice fields. The habitation here is relatively new. Interview with Raja Maheshwar Singh of Kulu, October, 2000.
6. A great deal has been written about the Kulu *Deotas*. The treatment varies from being cursory to being very detailed. See, thus, Lyall, J.B. (1874); *Gazetteer of the Kangra District*, (1897: 40-56); Rose, H.A. (1911); Thakur, M.R. (1981), Sharma, B.R. (1990), in Rustomji, N.K., and Ramble Charles, eds., (1990); Pandey, C.P. (1990); Vashista Sudarshan (n.d.); Gautam Dayanand, ed., (n.d.).
7. The shrine is virtually invisible from a distance, there being no *shikhir* or tall structure raised over the sanctum sanctorum. The open fronted verandah-like space, in which the idol is installed, seems more like an integral part of the palace structures rather than a separate temple.
8. The Puri temple and the *yatra* of Jagannath has been the subject of innumerable and frequently dense studies. See, thus, Mishra, K.C. (1971); Mohapatra, Gopinath (1982); Patnaik, Nityananda (1977); Kar Bijayananda, (1989); Kulke, H. (1993); Dube, Ishita Bannerjee (2001); and Mubayi, Yaaminey (2005: 21, 115).
9. Studies of the Ram Lila of Ramnagar have been made from different perspectives. Thus, Freitag, Sandra (1989); Kapur, Anuradha (1990); Schechner, Richard (1993).
10. For a succinct delineation of myths legends and folklore, see, Chetan Singh (2005: 1-19). Also see, Malinowski, Bronislaw (1954: 100-1260).
11. This myth has been listed in a large number of texts. Gazetteers and Settlement Reports of the Colonial period and publications of the

- Department of Language, Culture and Art, Himachal Government, Shimla. Many of these have already been listed above.
12. The date A.D. 1637-1672 ascribed to Jagat Singh by Hutchinson J., and Vogel, J. ph. (1933: II, 458) is uncertain. Many of these are approximate dates and need to be reworked.
 13. For a study of Vaiṣṇavism in Himachal Pradesh, the erstwhile Punjab Hill States, See, Goswamy, Karuna, (1968: 41-93).
 14. To be seen present but standing at a distance at all major functions centering around Raghunathaji, is a family of priests, popularly referred to as 'Ayodhya-Basis'. These priests had accompanied the image from Ayodhya and were given land grants at Bhuntar. No function relating to Raghunathji is considered complete without their presence. Interestingly they are never left alone with the image for fear they might steal it and take it back to Ayodhya.
 15. The Raja of Kulu must necessarily have experienced difficulties while trying to gain acceptance for the new faith. This is evident from the quick change in the place of *sthapana* of the image of Raghunath, which 'travelled' from Makarsa, Kot Kandi, Jagatsukh Thāwa and finally to Sultanpur, to its present temple.
 16. Even though this is a conjecture the fact of Jagat Singh's conversion to Vaiṣṇavism is strongly supported by the evidence of painting. See, Goswamy, Karuna, (1968: 94-166).
 17. For information on *muafis* (rent-free tenures of land) in exchange for services, see Lyall, (1874: 124-129); Kangra District-Gazetteers, (1897, 1917); Diack, A.H., (1898). Also see, Milner, Murray jr. (1994: 50).
 18. From interviews with Pt. Chandra Sekhar 'Bebas', from the family of the Raj-Purohiths of the Raja of Kulu and Kardars of several *Deota* temples, it appears that the *Pancaviras* of Kota-Kandi occupied a place of pre-eminence in terms of being the *deotas* believed in by the Kulu Raja. This is prior to the coming of Raghunathji and the Raja's conversion to Vaiṣṇavism.
 19. The question of certain *deotas* not attending the Kulu Dussehra masks conflicts arising out of social, political and religious issues. Independence, rebellion and non-conformance gets reflected in their attitude. Detailed attention would be paid to this in my larger project.
 20. The two known occasions on which the Dussehra was discontinued in 1947 and 1972 created a tremendous imbalance in society. Again in 1986 the attendance of the *deotas* at the Dussehra went down. The need for the Dussehra is evident from the fact that a joint effort by government officials, public figures and religious Mahants were made to restart the festival at that time.
 21. During the course of my extended stay in Kulu at Dusshera time in 1996, 1998 and 2000, I noticed that no significant changes had taken place in the general format of the festival. This is based on my personal observation. Interviews in the field were conducted with officials from the D.C.'s office

and local heads of the regional branch of the Language, Culture and Arts Akademi of Himachal Pradesh at Kulu. Dr. Sita Ram Shastri, Dr. Vidya Chand Thakur and Dr. Vidya Sharma, were interviewed, as was the Dussehra clerk from the D C's office.

22. The Raja of Kulu along with another representative of the Raghunath Temple is an important member of the *Devta* Sub-committee of the Kulu administration. There are many occasions on which he chairs and is the convener of the *Devta* committee: In deference to the Raja Sahib being the central figure of the Dussehra festival, the administration asks him to decide and give the dates and days on which the festival would be held. This information was collected from the Dussehra and the *Deota* sub-committee files of the Kulu administration.
23. A simple classification of the *deotas* is given in J.B. Lyall, (1874: 83). Elaborate information was given by Pt. Chandrakant, an earlier priest of the Raghunath Temple.
24. For a fairly comprehensive list of the important *deotas* of Kulu, see, Vashishta, Sudarshan (n.d.: 37-140); Vidya Sharma, (2001: 1-7).
25. It is quite customary for the people to ask the *deotas* to make a prophecy in response to their *Puchch* [query]. The *Puchch* made from the *Gur* of Hidimba is considered to be the most important.
26. Classical and tribal strands appear to have coalesced in the persona of Narsingh ji who is worshipped along with Raghunathji. Kulu is referred to as a Narsingh *gaddi*. *Deota* Narsingh Bir one of the *Pancaviras*, somehow gets mixed up with the classical Narsingh *avatar*. This reflects itself in the worship patterns and the *bhog* of Narsinghji as also in the worship of Narsingh-ji-ki-*ghodi*, a matter which will be discussed at greater length in my work.
27. The doorway is known as *Atharah kardu ka parol*. This probably has a reference to a legend involving the spread of the *deota* cult in Kulu. Specifically, it may well signify that these were the first eighteen *deotas* to pay homage to Raghunathji. Also see, Gautam, Dayanand (n.d.: 21-22); Thakur, Laxman S., (2002: 323-324).
28. I have not yet explored the economic dimensions of the Kulu Dussehra. Combining business with a religious festival appears to be a well known concept. Pilgrims going to Jwalamukhi, Kangra district, often say, *nale devi de darsan, nale munj da vyapara*. This refers to the combining of pilgrimage with trading in hemp. Trade appears to have flourished between Ladakh, Tibet, Yarkand and the Northern Plains of India, according to Pt. Chandra Shekhar. For detailed information see, *Gazetteer of the Kangra District* (1897: 129, 130); Minhas, Poonam (1998).
29. Troupes performing the *Raslila* of Krishna and also the *Ramlila* were known to travel throughout the country to present their 'miracle' plays to audiences located in different parts of the northern plains. Paintings of Maharana Sangram Singh of Mewar watching the plays of the *Rasdhari*s of Mathura

- are in the Binney Collection, San Diego Museum, San Diego US.
30. For useful information on *Chandravali* and other local dramatic forms, see, Sharma, Kamal Kishore (1985: 17-18, 56). Also see, Hein, Norwin, (1972).
 31. The *pancabali* consists of the sacrifice of the buffalo, the lamb, the crab, the fish, and the cock.
 32. The title of 'Raja' is no longer needed after the abolition of the princely states. But in memory of the past and as a matter of courtesy these titles continue to be used by everyone. Technically also 'The Raja of Rupi' was just a formal title because the state had spilt up into two different states that of Rupi and Shangri. I would like to acknowledge with immense gratitude the help received by me from Raja Maheshwar Singhji during my fieldwork.
 33. Lal Chand Prarthi had attempted to impinge upon the Raja's territory in matters concerning the Jaleb. This had resulted in a firing. The matter was taken to court and the jurisdiction of the Raja restored.