

Deities in the Space(s) of Devtas: A Study of Hadimba vis-à-vis Hidimba

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Abstract

India, in contemporaneity, has been foregrounding a dominant tendency of a "Nationalism," that situates the entire geographical space of present India in a singular cultural paradigm. This nationalism is defined by an over-arching religious structure that presumes a homogenous ubiquitousness over the entire length and breadth of the Indian landmass. However, historically, India has been home to a plethora of communities, each, in its limited physical space, having its own unique cultural paradigm and religious identity. Situated traditionally in physically inaccessible spaces, without the prying eyes of the mainstream, these communities flourished for centuries. However, with development and progress, the "advantage" of physical isolation was lost, and "Nationalism" made decisive inroads into the communities' space initiating a cultural exchange. One major manifestation of this exchange was the onset of a religious inter-communication where the regional Institution of the Devta was exposed and juxtaposed to the national religious Gaze, represented through the deity.

Placing the religious national stance through Hidimba, the wife of Bheem in *The Mahabharat*, the paper shall assess how the space(s) and cult of an indigenous *devi*, Hadimba, one of the primary Goddesses in the Himalayan region of Kullu, Himachal Pradesh was affected by this influx. The paper strives to assess the paradigm of this inter-communication and its repercussions on the autochthonous' structure of divinity. The paper also aims to foreground its implications on the region's cultural fabric and its "coming to terms" with it.

Keywords: Hadimba, Hidimba, Religious Nationalism, Lore, Myth

...'knowledge flow' wherein...culture is constantly being renewed and reinvigorated by what is being transmitted across space. Such processes are not confined to data and information transfer.

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Instead, knowledge flow refers to those bundles of...practices, modes of thinking, customs,...and so on that facilitate and expedite effects, outcomes, results and problem solving in other places and at other times...(Moran, 2)

Culture, then, as a concept can be symbolized as crossroads with peoples consistently and persistently walking past it. Culture, then, like the person, is continuously scanned and relentlessly scrutinizes, leading to a two-way "flow." Culture thereby becomes a dynamic concept affected by and affecting men and mankind. This dynamism is immanent, given that any cultural interaction, whether voluntary or imposed; coerced or hegemonic, brings in its train an exchange, mingling and fusion of practices and systems, a persistent adaptation.

This adaptation, in a globalized world, has been predominantly evaluated and assessed at a "grand" scale, with discussions and deliberations centralizing on inter-national cultures and cultural exchange. The entire construct of this exchange is founded on the idea of a homogeneous and singular culture, as it is primarily directed at "thinking the nation" (Anderson, 22). However, at this macro-level interaction, the process of association, encounter and interaction affected at the "micro," intra-national and regional level, is negated and marginalized. This regional dimension refers to the peoples and their cultures within the apparently homogenous and singular national culture.

India, in contemporaneity, also projects itself as a nation on the foundations of a pan-Indian culture represented through a religious commonality. As a part of this conduit, one of the defining parameters of India as a nation is the presence of a pan-India religious sensibility that is uniform, singular and homogeneously applicable to all the inhabitants within its ambit. It, then, sweepingly places everyone within its fold in one form or the other, limiting them to being subservient to the one constructed identity. This religious identity is scriptural, theoretical, abstract and idolatory by nature.

India, however, has also been home to communities, residing principally in the North-East, Odisha, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, whose cultures and religious manifestations stand significantly distinct from that of religious nationalism. The cultures of these communities, tribals or indigenous, residing "inside" the national cultural ambit are their lived experiences. Inhabiting the mountains of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh is one such community which subsumes peoples having their own overlapping yet distinct cultures and religious systems: the Pahadi Community.

For a long time, a major section of the Pahadi community has lived, nestled in the mountains of Kullu, erstwhile known as *Kulantpitha*, geographically isolated from the mainstream, a traditional life supervised by its most prestigious and highest placed cultural marker: the institution of the *devi-devta*. It is a cultural system that, till date, oversees the social, political, religious and even legal aspects of the life of the pahadi community. In Kullu, this institution and the corresponding cultural paraphernalia is represented by the *devi* that presides over the entire region and is the protective grandmother of its current royal lineage: Hadimba.

The very name strikes an immediate familiarity as the demoness Hidimba, sister of demon Hidimb, who fell in love with one of the Pandav brothers, Bheem, married him and bore him a son, the great warrior, Ghatotkach. She, then, is recognized as a part of the grand Indian Epic, *The Mahabharat*. Regionally and traditionally in Dhungri, however, the entire cult of Hadimba marks its presence without any reference to *The Mahabharat* or any of its characters, much

less as the wife of Bheem. There has been an absolute absence of Bheem and also Ghatotkach in Hadimba's traditional processions, highlighting the inherent distinction between the cultural denominations of Hadimba and Hidimba.

The distinctiveness of Pahadi culture from the nationalist culture is further evinced by the lores of her origin. Unlike *the* (emphasis mine) established Structure of the national narrative where Hidimba is a part of *The Mahabharat* as a demoness, the sister of demon Hidimb, wife of Bheema and mother of Ghatotkach; Hadimba's lores are a (emphasis mine) conglomeration of a multifarious, multiple and even non-conciliatory narratives. The lore connecting her to the royal family of Kullu highlights her as an "old lady" who promised Behangmani Pal, when came to Kullu from Haridwar, then called Mayapuri, help in defeating the Thakurs, thereby establishing him as the *raja* of Kullu, with its capital at Jagatsukh. Later, the old lady makes a reappearance when Sidh Pal obtained her support to become the king of Kullu and it is her temple, built by his son Bahadur Singh, that stands at Dhungri. In another lore, she is a child playing high up in the mountains with a Nag, brought down to Dhungri along with a flood and becoming a Goddess here; while a third places her origin in Tibet, not as Hadmiba but as Hirma, from where she came with her brothers, Raja Ghepan and Jamlu. Whilst Ghepan stayed back in Lahaul and Jamlu went to Malana, Hadimba stay put at Dhungri. A connected narrative further places the three deities as Nags who came from the far land.

The multiplicity of narratives, in turn, foregrounds a critical factor explicitly non-existent in any nationalist culture, including the pan-Indian cultural paradigm: Absence of Reconciliation. The regional communities have, much like Bakhtinian polyphony, acknowledged the variegatedness and accepted it. The ease with which the Pahadi community has embraced this non-linearization stands in strong contrast to the emphasis on the mono-dimensional singularization that the national culture vociferously emphasizes on. What allows such disparateness to co-exist is the underlying principle of the notion of truth in the marginal world that is unfamiliar to the notions practiced by the mainstream. The Pahadi culture is not founded on the monologic narratives of the mainstream culture and hence, finds disparateness and non-closure to be natural. As Geertz asserts, "solemn reduplication of the achievements of accepted masters is called academicism; and I think this is the proper name for our malady also. Only if we abandon, in a phrase of Leo Steinberg's, that sweet sense of accomplishment which comes from parading habitual skills and address ourselves to problems sufficiently ----unclarified as to make discovery possible, can we hope to achieve work which will not just reincarnate that of the great men of the first quarter of this century, but match it." (Geertz, 88).

The culture of the autochthonous, concretely represented in its Institution of the *devta*, and corroborating rituals, practices and representations of the deity further alienate the nationalist culture in the Himalayas. The Pahadi deities are carried on *raths* bearing *mohras* (faces) unlike the idols of religious Nationalism. Hadimba's *mohras*, set on the *rath*, are diverse, some even having masculine qualities of a moustache, demarcating her stature as the most powerful and beyond the domains of being a male or a female. It also connects her to her demoniac origins, "demoniac" being representative of a people who were beyond the *Kulantapith* and hence had a culture unlike the 'cultured mainstream.' The pahadi gods, including Hadimba, are animated and are known to "dance with the *deolus*," representative of their nativity and active involvement in the 'mundane' lives of the peoples, unlike the static idol of religious

nationalism, confined to the *garbhagriha* in a temple. The indigenous concept of the sacred is unlike any concept in orthodox mainstream religion as the latter dwells on abstractions and highly coded scriptures, and hence, cannot align with the regional that is concrete and lived, qualities alien to the national cultural narrative that labels the other as barbaric and uncultured. As Anderson opines, "...classical communities linked by sacred languages had a character distinct from the imagined communities of modern nations" (13).

The *mohra* on the *rath*, in tandem with the *chari* and the *gur* form a complex and unique agency, unlike the national mainstream, governing the lives of the people through the sacred *devi-devta* system. It is a paradigm that is experiential, materially tangible and immediately accessible. Her sacredness, and not religiosity, is representative of the distinct gaze through which the native culture constructs its order, nuances and world. These "...sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos - the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood - and their world view-the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (Geertz, 89-90).

The sacredness associated with these symbols and ceremonies serves as a language for expressing the nativity and alterity of the culture of Hadimba from the nationalist cultural narrative of Hidimba. This language, however, is based on a non-arbitrary and concrete relationship where the symbols and lived experiences are intricately and "logically" interwoven: "...if the sacred silent languages were the media through which the great global communities of the past were imagined, the reality of such apparitions depended on an idea largely foreign to the contemporary Western mind: the non-arbitrariness of the sign. The ideograms of Chinese, Latin, or Arabic were emanations of reality, not randomly fabricated representations of it" (Anderson, 14). This non-arbitrariness and concreteness draws its life force from its immanent connect with the lived experiences of the people.

The Nationalist cultural narrative, on the contrary, is steeped in the abstraction of the spiritual experience founded on the homogeneous nature of a higher order that is outside the ambit of ordinary and routine understanding. Radhakrishnan, in *The Hindu View of Life* reiterates this orthodoxy and coded esotericness when he says, "The chief sacred scriptures of the Hindus, the Vedas, register the intuitions of the perfected souls...They record the spiritual experiences of souls strongly endowed with the sense for reality. They are held to be authoritative on the ground that they express the experiences of the experts in the field of religion. If the utterances of the Vedas were uninformed by spiritual insight, they would have no claim to our belief. The truths revealed in the Vedas are capable of being re-experienced on compliance with ascertained conditions. We can discriminate between the genuine and the spurious in religious experience, not only by means of logic but also through life" (Radhakrishnan, 17). What foregrounds the entire construct is the emphasis on "intuitions," "souls," "spiritual experiences" and "spiritual insight," all predominantly abstract concepts but apparently foregrounded as "transcripts from life" and *The Mahabharat* its representative manifestation. Moreover, the understanding of the epic and the unity that it attempts to generate is also dependent on "experts in the field of religion" and "compliance with ascertained conditions." In addition, the concept of "they are held to be authoritative..." adds to the idea of elitism and the principle of singularity.

The process of adaptation, ensuing from the mingling of national narrative with the regional narratives has been pre-dominantly unidirectional. The national has, owing to its status as the "self," imposed its structure and ideology on the "other," the regional. Consequently, the folklores of Hadimba have narrowed down to the singular myth of Hidimba, part of the national narrative emanating from *The Mahabharat*. Historically though, the *Mahabharatization* of Hadimba into Hidimba is a recent phenomenon and a product of the arrival of religious nationalism in Kullu and the inter-change ensuing thereof. A glaring example of this is the sudden *uttpatti* of a small place in reverence to Ghatotkach, the son of Hidimba. However, this *sthan* is one where, traditionally, the *nishani* of one of the local guardian deities of the temple precincts is placed, as Halperin reiterates, "...elders in Manali still call the Dhungri Ghatotkacha *so rikhi* (Pahari: guardian of the ground). This indicates that he probably used to be a protector deity, whose job was to mark and safeguard the boundary of Hadimba's temple precincts. Neel said that, as a child, he knew Ghatotkacha only as *so rikhi*" (133).

The place offered to Ghatotkach is a striking example of the aggressive execution of the ideological paradigm of homogenization. His presence in the precincts of the temple offers visual validation to the singular grand narrative, a prerequisite towards the creation of "the one national community," especially in the midst of 'digressions,' as Benedict Anderson asserts, "We are faced with a world in which the figuring of imagined reality was overwhelmingly visual and aural" (Anderson, 22-23). Ghatotkach, at Dhungri, becomes the first visual representation of the nationalistic identity of Hadimba, and it won't be an exaggeration to opine that soon one of the big rocks in the area shall be ascertained as *Bheem shila*. The entire *Ghatotkachization* at Dhungri is just a part of steering the local away towards the established "Structure," paving the way for the establishment of the national singularity over the 'disparities' of the regional. His recognition becomes an edifice that glorifies the national singular narrative woven around the myth in *The Mahabharat*, the great epic that is, much like Bakhtin opines in "Epic and the Novel," frozen and rigid.

Hadimba's "little narratives," *petit recits* in the larger scale of things, but dominant in the Pahadi Community, are thereby lost and negated in the deluge of such nationalism. It is under the influence of the ideology of the powerful, that the process of cultural adaptation is undertaken and subsequently, the power structures at work, subsume the regional cultural paradigms. Ideology, in the present times, "...has now become, to quote Webster's, "the integrated assertions, theories, and aims constituting a politico-social program, often with an implication of factitious propagandizing..." (Geertz, 193). In the name of cultural adaptation, the dominant or the grand culture promotes "the perception...that a particular cultural life is increasingly universal [thereby making] More and more consumers...to share in its practices and products, with those products becoming more and more homogeneous" (Moran, 2).

The emergent culture, then, gradually assumes the form that the powerful aspires for: in sync with its linearity. This "powerful," in antiquity was derived from the victor and vanquished in a battlefield; but in the current milieu, the "powerful" and their corresponding cultural adaptation is an act of "the macro forces...The cultural remaking under investigation is invariably part of a widespread commodity culture...the nation-state itself may constitute an important alternative actor in particular scenarios concerning cultural adaptation" (Moran, 3). The prevalent national culture, in the process, appropriates the regional cultures and variations, by asserting a

familiarity in the regional space through narratives from the mainstream that are, apparently, "always already" (Ramanujan, 158).

One of the major implications of such nationalistic impositions is the misconstruing of native culture. One such misrepresentation finds place in *Shamans of the Himalayas* when the author refers to the possession of the *gur*, called *mitha* or *khel aana*, as "Initiatory crisis of the future shaman...This state is also called the "shamanic illness"" (Malhotra, xx). The reference to the words "crisis" and "illness" by Malhotra summarizes the stereotypical construct of regional cultures by the mainstream or an outsider, based on a structured and documented theological framework. This framework revolves around extraordinary abstractions and anything that does not fit in its domain is relegated, at best as primitive practice or superstition; and at worst, a derogatory mode of living.

Shamans and what they indulge in, on the contrary, is an, "oracular performance....a highly common practice in Pahadi region. Possession, trance, or *khel*, as it is often called..." (Halperin, 42). It is an elaborate ritual where there is, "At night the dance of gurs in semitrance in temple courtyard lit by pine wood flames..." (Kapoor, xx). "Oracular, highly common, *khel*, dance and semitrance" presents a picture closer to the actual Lived Experience of the people and "...tell[s] how these villages have evolved their own tradition of mythological reference points..." (Parmar, 3239).

The entire mis-construct has also manifested itself in terms of imposing vegetarian practices of religious nationalism on the nativity of Hadimba, who is traditionally steeped in animal sacrifices. Halperin iterates the elaborate procees of *bali* when he says, "...sacrifice is named *atharah bali* (eighteenfold sacrifice), since, aside from the buffalo, other offerings are also given to the goddess such as sheep, a pig, a water crab, coconuts and a pumpkin" (1). Sacrifices have always been critical to the Pahadi community in Himachal Pradesh, and Kullu is no exception to it. Even the Dussehra of Kullu opens with the *ashtabali* by the reigning king. The misconstruing leads to an ignoring of the actual scenario of lived religion that the regional cultures practice as a part of their sensory living and its social relevance as pillars of a community that ensures unexploited subsistence for everyone.

What harms the interests of regional cultures is the lack of organized scriptures and singular mythical narratives. The "visible culture" (Parmar, 3238) that these two forces generate become the pillars on which the entire corpus of nationalist ideology rests. The interaction with the regional margins, and the ensuing adaptation, then, ceases to be neutral, equal or equitable. The ideology of homogenous nationalism, in vogue now, threatens the autonomy of the native cultures. Moran reiterates the principle as he says, "Cultural adaptation is a convenient way of alluding to this important capacity of groups and individuals to shape the pattern of life of themselves and those around them" (2).

In this power structure, the homogenous and singular national cultural narrative shall overtake the regional community cultures in its pursuit of building "the community," i.e. "thinking a nation," as Anderson asserts, "Beneath the decline of sacred communities, languages and lineages, a fundamental change was taking place in modes of apprehending the world, which, more than anything else, made it possible to 'think' the nation." (Anderson, 22).

In case of Hadimba of Dhungri as well, it becomes a process where Hidimba of *The Mahabharat* decimates the former, her space and the pahadi culture intricately interwoven with her.

Hidmiba, the deity, coming to be worshipped at Manali, mythologizing the lores of Hadimba, the *devi* of Dhingri, is leading to a kind of adaptation that shall culminate in an irretrievable cultural loss. Cultural adaptations such as the one reducing "a" *devi* to "the" deity are a spatial and cultural rupture that are detrimental and not precocious to India and its cultural ambit. As Parmar and Rana opine, "In a rapidly globalising world, such traditions are under threat as the momentum for greater homogenisation of culture builds up" (Parmar, 3236). In the pursuit to establish a nation, the regional 'deviations' are negated as being, at best reprobate, and worst, apocryphal. In the words of Granville Austin, "To make Hinduness a requirement for Indianness is the worst kind of ugliness...Also it is denial of history and India's rich and varied culture. In short, it is nationalism gone mad" (Qtd. in Parmar, 3239).

The seamless plurality of Hadimba stands as a prime example of how singular linearity can be evaded. She is an ambiguous savior; a demoness and yet a God; magnanimous and yet ferocious; her presence in the lives of the people "lived" and concrete; and her lores out of bounds of a much-fancied singularization. The entire argument is reflective of the fact that the Indian space is multifaceted like a *devta* and not unidimensional like the deity and:

...the goal should never be to reduce the variety of human adaptations to a single triumphant form or to rank the cultures of the earth as if they were all competing for the same prize. (Gallagher, 6)

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