

Dussehra Festival: Situating the Cult of Rama in the Kullu Valley

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ABSTRACT: *The article tries to explore the festival of Dussehra, which establishes the cult of Rama in the Kullu valley in pre colonial India; thereby signifying the institutional notion of divine right of kingship, and how the procession of Raghunathji has been used as an item of heritage 'in the culturalisation process in post independent India. It also highlights its unique form as compared to its regional variations.*

KEY WORDS: *devta, gurr nazrana, Raghunathji, village deity, cult*

I. INTRODUCTION

Vijaydashmi, which is more popularly known as Dussehra, is an important and major Indian festival celebrated on the tenth day of Ashwin month according to the Hindu calendar. The day is celebrated to commemorate the killing of Ravana by Lord Rama. The day also celebrates the killing of demon Mahisasur by Goddess Durga. Dussehra celebration thus spreads the message of the victory of good over evil. Besides its religious importance, the Dussehra festival is also a ritual idiom of kingship symbolically representing the consecration and legitimisation of royal and political power. It assumes various local forms, depending on the various former kingdoms in which it is performed.

The history of Dussehra dates back to the 17th century, when local King Jagat Singh installed an idol of Raghunath on his throne as a mark of penance. After this, Lord Raghunath was declared as the ruling deity of the valley. He also provided village deities with land rights, requiring them to pay an annual tribute to Raghunath and to participate in the festival. In the pre-colonial period the villagers and their deities had to visit the capital, to take part in the rath yatra and to attend a darbar, a royal assembly held by the king during Dussehra. Participation by the village deities was compulsory, and defaulting deities had to pay an annual tribute to Raghunathji (nazrana). Dussehra in Kullu is a weeklong international fair held every year. Kullu which is well known as Valley of living Gods, marks the commencement of this festival on the tenth day itself which is celebrated for the next seven days. On the first day of Dussehra Goddess Hadimba of Manali comes down to Kullu to bless the members of the royal family. She is the Goddess of the royal family of Kullu and is considered grandmother of king of Kullu. The proceedings of the Kullu Dussehra start in her presence. However Raghunathji is the chief deity who presides over Dussehra festival, interestingly it is mandatory for all the village deities brought to the capital by villagers to attend the Dussehra celebrations at Kullu in order to pay homage to the King and to the Royal God. Some of them enter the festival square rocking frenziedly and the devotees holding them rejoice, singing and dancing in trance. The palanquin of Raghunathji is brought out to the festival square and put in the ratha. The celebration includes a dazzling decorated chariot carrying the idol of Raghunathji (Rama) which is pulled from its place in Dhalpur Maidan to another spot across the Maidan by big ropes. The pulling of ropes which forms a huge procession is considered as sacred by local people. On the last day the chariot is taken to the banks of River Beas where a pile of wood and grass are burnt symbolizing the burning of Lanka.

The festival of Dussehra in Kullu Valley is unique in two ways – firstly because elsewhere in other parts of our country, Gods and deities are worshipped and are permanently fixed to the temples, however in Kullu, the idol of the deities are not fixed to the temples but instead on special occasions like Dussehra come out in ornately decorated palanquins. In the procession there is a fixed hierarchy of what place the local deity will occupy. The palanquin of Lord Raghunathji is on the 'ratha' who is obviously in the centre-but there are often skirmishes as to which deity gets to occupy the immediate left and right position of lord Raghunath. In Kullu, village deities represent a very important element in the perception people have of their history and of their regional and territorial identity. What is perceived here as being specific to the area is the strong attachment of the population to their village deities (Devi/Devta). They are indeed considered to be local kings exercising their authority and justice over all those villagers who, independent of their caste, live inside their territorial jurisdictions – a village or a wider territory.

Many village interactions social and political matters 'go through' these deities who are said to express their opinions and points of views through their different representatives: people from temple committees (formed mainly by high caste villagers); institutional mediums (many of whom are of low status), and also through wooden mobile supports (the palki) which are carried on the shoulders of ordinary villagers and which are supposed to move according to the deities will. Some deities are said to have played a special role in the consolidation of the Kullu royal family and they are particularly famous in the area for instance Goddess Hadimba, Shringa Rishi or Balu nag. . In other cases, villagers affirm the importance of their village deity by claiming the identification of this deity with a pan Indian God, Rishi or heroes. The Gods of Kullu can be classified into three classes. The first are the ancient rishis (sages) and pious women of epic character. The second category belonging to the Naga (serpent) class and the third must be tribal chiefs and heroes. For centuries these devtas (village deity) have been at the centre of village economy in the valley. Villagers used to donate generously to the village God, who held courts, and was also responsible for the well being of all inhabitants. Every temple was headed by a pujari who was the custodian of the devta's properties and had thus, right to use it.

Secondly in the valleys of Himalayas including the Kullu Valley still practice a more 'tantric' and animistic form of Hinduism. Gods are represented by 'rathas' (palanquins) studded with metallic mohras (faces) variegated cloth lengths and flowers, and lifted on the shoulders by two men. Women have hardly any role to play in the affairs of the Gods. The 'rathas' are accompanied by bands of deity musicians, attendants, followers and carriers of royal or divine artefacts etc. Thereby symbolizing the divine right of kingship. The rathas often become animated or possessed of spirits and show various human moods and behaviour like anger through rushing frantically or happiness by dancing in a leisurely manner, meeting with friends, etc besides actually speaking through the medium of gurr (oracle) and answering to various queries of the devotees. Thus the spirits maintain their influence by entering the physical body of these men (gurr). The feud between the various village deities to establish their supremacy is also a common feature in Kullu Dussehra and manifests itself in the form of gurr being possessed and getting into disputes, to decide which village deity would proceed next to Raghunathji in the procession.

The Kullu Dussehra shows how the shift from ritual to heritage has been made through an appropriation of local religious logics. The cult of Rama or Raghunathji (the main hero of Dussehra) has not only been used in Kullu to legitimize kingship in the pre colonial era, but also in the post colonial era the processions have been used as an 'item of heritage' and for the culturalisation process which is visible in the Jagannath Puri yatra, in the Dussehra festival of Mysore or in nearby Uttarakhand where Nanda devi and her ritual procession have become the most important regional icon of the newly formed regional state. Dussehra at Kullu shows how the shift from ritual to heritage has been made through an appropriation of religious logics. In Kullu the main protagonist is Raghunath who upholds the notion of Dussehra as a 'royal festival' at the same time the village deities make the most of the 'culturalisation process' by receiving cultural funding earlier from the king and now from the state government. Unlike other areas, a possession cult in Kullu has not undergone a tremendous change. Deities 'palanquins and mediums' oracular possessions are still very much a part of this procession. What has changed from the pre colonial period to the post colonial period is the fact that now it is no more mandatory for the village deities to pay homage towards the God and the King, but is an outcome of the Dussehra committee's appeal to keep the 'tradition' alive. The promotion of Dussehra as cultural heritage has involuntarily created the conditions for adapting royal culture, based on politico-religious alliances between the king and the village gods, to the political system of contemporary India. The deity institution in Himachal has a significant role to play in the material aspect of life in the state, however the socio-ecological aspects of the institution of deities has an immense bearing on conflicts of interest amongst various groups in the area, and thus the government should understand that it is almost dangerous to make an attempt to alter the psychology of a culture.

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