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## Introduction: Kings Divine

**J**AUN SAR AND BAWAR are twin mountain regions situated in the north-west of the district of Dehra Dun, interim capital of the Indian hill state of Uttarakhand. With the two principal hill regions in Uttarakhand – Garhwal and Kumaon – dominating electoral politics and constantly bickering over the spoils of development, Jaunsar and Bawar seem to have been left out of the race for material progress. Even though picturesque, these regions attract few visitors as compared to the neighbouring hill station of Mussoorie or the pilgrim centres of Haridwar and Rishikesh. The region's natural resources are exploited in good measure, for there are several hydroelectric projects and timber-collection centres, but the absence of roads, the poor communication networks, and the lack of educational facilities point towards long-term neglect on the part of successive governments. Historically, too, Jaunsar and Bawar, owing to their strong social and political system of village councils under the tutelage of deities (which inhibited the emergence of human rulers), have remained isolated from the neighbouring regions that have been ruled more conventionally by human kings. During colonial times and thereafter, access to the Jaunsar-Bawar region was restricted, with the British setting up a military base at Chakrata, the entry point to the mountains from the United Provinces. Even now, foreign nationals are not permitted into the Chakrata Cantonment. Appellations such as “tribal” were attached to the traditional Hindu caste society here – despite

its social structure being not very different from other mountain communities around it – after the government of independent India decided on affirmative action aimed towards giving greater opportunities for education and employment to people from this region. This proved counterproductive, leading to even more seclusion.

The region's social particularities, such as the practice of human sacrifice and head-hunting, have fascinated scholars for long, even as local anthropologists and sociologists themselves, following the peculiar traditions of anthropological research in India, have contributed to notions of the region's peripherality by focusing almost entirely on specific matrimonial practices here, such as polyandry, *dhanti* marriage (marriage of a divorced woman), and bride-price.

Jaunsar-Bawar is bisected by the River Tons, which has carved out largely inaccessible river valleys and deep gorges, creating a densely wooded landscape. Once the Tons joins the Pabbar and flows into the plains at Dehra Dun, it is referred to as the Yamuna. While the river is considered sacred in the plains – poets and saints have eulogised its banks as Krishna's playground – in these parts it is usually referred to as Tamasa, "the dark river". Ancient texts refer to it – in stark contrast to the Ganga as the river that washes away sins and grants immeasurable merit to those who bathe in it ritually – as Karmanasha, "the destroyer of merit". These uncharitable connotations have ensured that the river flows through the mountains largely undisturbed. Few temple towns – other than the small township with the Yamunotri temple at the fountainhead, set up to complete the pilgrimage circuit of Char Dham, the four sacred sites within the state – appear on the banks. There are no bathing ghats dotting the mountainous course of the Tons, and the few temples that may be found by the river, established next to cremation sites, are considered cursed. Water from the river is rarely used for purificatory rites and ritual bathing.

In Dehra Dun, the administrative headquarters of the hill district where I grew up, mention of the region in conversations usually

fed into notions of otherness. Jaunsar-Bawar was often referred to as a land of magical spells (especially those cast by women to ensnare unsuspecting men from the plains!), the land of heroin cultivation, the land where home-brewed rice-beer flowed free.

I first arrived in Jaunsar in 1995 as a college student, after the successful conclusion of an international youth convention that I had helped organise. So pleased was the district administrator with the success of the event that he arranged an official jeep for me and my friends, who were part of the organising team, to travel through the region as a reward for our efforts. We were quite excited at the prospect of venturing into what was to us until then unknown territory. However, our spirits were somewhat dampened when he asked us to keep our ears to the ground for instances of women trapped into bonded labour and prostitution. This had been increasingly reported to him in recent times, a matter that could not be investigated “officially” without ruffling political feathers. His strange request and the hidden agenda behind our reward holiday greatly added to our misgivings about the region and the trip.

As we drove up the narrow gorges and down the steep valleys carved out of the mountains by the Tons, we arrived at the temple of Hanol by the river bank. The temple did appear different from those we were accustomed to in the Dehra Dun valley and the plains beyond. Situated in an area of vast fields, a rarity in these parts, the temple made quite an impression on us. Owing to the open space around it, the shrine was visible from a distance despite being situated much below road level. With a pagoda-like roof covered with black slate tiles, wooden pendants hanging from the eaves, and intricately carved wall panels, the shrine was quite unlike any other temple we had seen. Though bedecked with Hindu iconography, the images carved on its wood panels were interestingly rustic, some of them illustrating warrior-like divinities combating demons to establish their supremacy.

Upon entering the courtyard, we were sternly warned against carrying leather inside the sanctum lest we invoke the displeasure

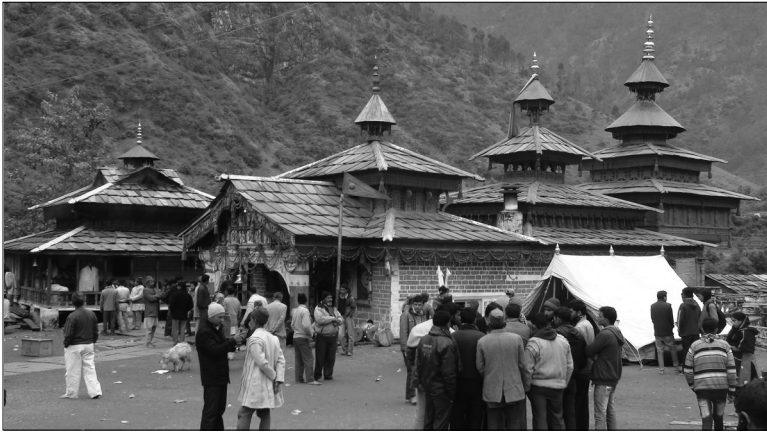


Photo 1.1: The Mahasu Devta Temple at Hanol.

of the presiding deity, Mahasu. We had to leave our waist belts, wristwatches, wallets, and footwear outside the courtyard boundary. After a fleeting glimpse of the idol in the dim light of a solitary pine twig burning like incense, this being twirled around by the priest for a few seconds before the door of the sanctum was slammed shut, we came out of the temple. The images inside were shrouded in secrecy and no photographs were permitted. We emerged into the courtyard – only to see a goat being sacrificed. A man wearing the traditional village cap and jacket had decapitated the goat with a small axe called a *dangra* and was holding the beheaded animal upside down, while another collected the blood dripping from its neck in a bowl. A few men waited around, as if to collect their share of the kill. For some of us in the group, unused to bloodletting, it was quite a revolting sight.

As we went around the shrine, we noticed another smaller but shiny new temple across the river. This temple, we learnt, was also devoted to Mahasu, albeit with a different first name for the deity: while the temple at Hanol was dedicated to Bautha Mahasu, the one on the other bank was dedicated to Pabasik Mahasu. The gods were siblings and of the same form (*ek rup*), we were told, their

devotees at times allies, at others competitors for grazing rights, and in certain ways adversaries too. Pabasik was a localised form of the deity who “ruled” over the north bank, while another deity, Basik, held jurisdiction over the south bank. The seated deity, Bautha (*lit.* sitting) Mahasu, provided a kind of axis for the cult to revolve around, and it was Chalda (*lit.* walking) Mahasu who tilted the spatial balance of political power within the cult, constantly travelling in a palanquin carried by his officials and militia over a large area across both banks of the river.

Since we were travelling in a jeep fitted with official plates, it was presumed that we were government officials from the administrative headquarters at Dehra Dun. One of the priests at Hanol, while offering us a cup of tea, complained that the new shrine commissioned in Thadiyar, on the opposite bank, was a challenge to the authority of their deity, also pointing out that the river marked

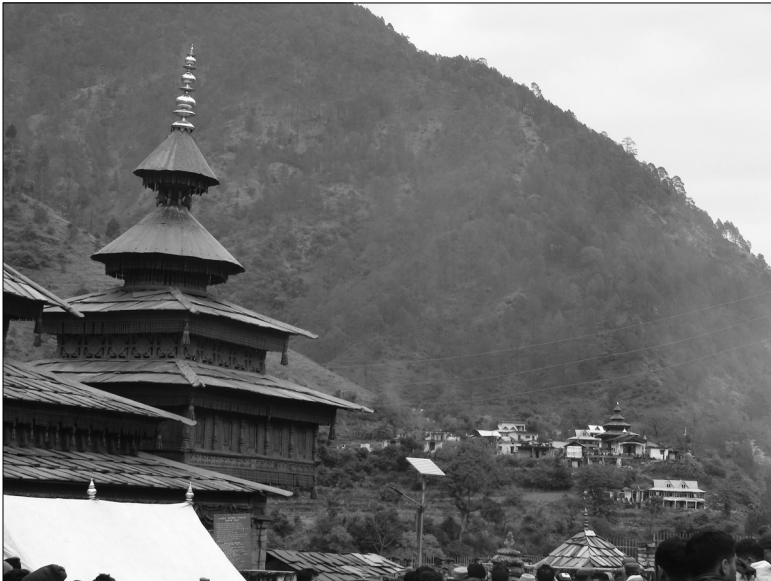


Photo 1.2: In the foreground, the temple at Hanol, with the Pabasik Mahasu temple in the distance, at Thadiyar, across the river.

the boundary of the Dehra Dun district. Across the river, the temple had been built in the district of Uttarkashi.

The political significance of what at the time appeared to be an instance of unremarkable rivalry between two shrines competing for devotees was revealed several years later as a full-blown religious and political battle. That happened when I returned to Hanol, almost a decade and a half later, in 2009, to commence field research. My work on the implications of religious rituals on social and political life in the Mahasu cult revealed to me that religion and politics commingled in more ways than one could imagine. Now, when I looked at the two temples across opposite banks of the Tons, I was at once reminded of the priest's objection to the new temple. The two shrines facing each other, the new one erected in fairly recent times as an act of defiance, seemed to offer an insight into the political effects of religious ritual in these mountain communities. But before one delves into the politics of temple-building, it is perhaps essential to comprehend the nature of divine politics at work in these valleys.

This is quite a task, for the political control of deities extends over vast territories much beyond the limits of Uttarakhand and into the neighbouring state of Himachal Pradesh. During the course of fieldwork I travelled through valleys and over ridges spanning these two hill states where Mahasu is worshipped and where grand temples to him keep springing up, usually with active financial support from politicians, those in office looking for divine support to continue, and those out of it seeking intervention. I walked with the deity's processions to understand what it was that made the devout invest substantial financial resources and time to the organising of ritual tours and festivals. I also observed politicians, firmly entrenched in echelons of power, visiting temples and seeking allegiances with the deity. Observing Mahasu's influence closely, I came to realise that rituals which at first glance appeared religious ("blind superstition" to some administrators) were politically quite significant. Mahasu, even though a deity in a

temple – or an image concealed inside a box-like palanquin – was in fact political master to the people of Jaunsar-Bawar and their neighbours. I witnessed Mahasu oracles delivering verdicts towards the choosing of candidates for elections, saw temple officials endorsing electoral candidates, and received hints from temple managers on how even British officials had capitulated to Mahasu's authority. That these incidents pointed towards how religious ritual translated into powerful political effects gradually became evident to me over successive trips. But whether, in a country described by its constitution as a secular democracy, Mahasu ritual stood its ground as an agentive force, i.e. an influence strong enough to significantly alter social lives, and whether it represented a unique "system" of divine kingship which probably pre-dated human kingship, seemed to require further inquiry.

Political secularism has for long been considered a necessary aspect of modernisation. Modernisation theory, with its roots in Enlightenment ideals of progress, gained strength ever since Marx formulated his notion of class analysis corresponding with the growth of modern capitalism. The notion that new forms of production bring in unprecedented change within modes of human living – including the idea of a gradual separation of religious activities from those of the state – gained currency with the growing influence of Modernisation theory.

Building upon Marx's ideas almost five decades later, Weber introduced the concept of rationality to explain how society had shifted from a mystic or traditional orientation to a more rational one. Rationalisation, to Weber, was the process of replacing traditional and emotional thought with reason and practicality. He believed that most societies were throughout history governed by tradition, and that the most significant trend in modern times was the increasing rationalisation of every aspect of daily life. The rise of scientific education, the development of capitalism, and the introduction of bureaucracy into government over the last two centuries were, according to Weber and several subsequent thinkers,

examples of this trend towards secular living (Lerner 1957; Luckmann 1967; Weber 2002). These social scientists and intellectuals, influential at the time of India's independence, predicted the gradual demise of religion as a political factor.

The idea central to this belief had been that the onset of modernity would lead to a complete break from the past, an ontological break as it were, and that the dominance of science would force human society to change drastically, making it tread a path where ritual and religion would find no place in political and social life. Sax (2009: 235) has pointed out that in the 1950s and 1960s modernisation theory was enthusiastically supported by many newly liberated states that believed they would be strengthened when pre-modern loyalties – to ethnic group, regional language, tribe, caste, and above all religion – which they collectively designated “primordial loyalties”, were abandoned for secular, democratic, and national, i.e. thoroughly modern, loyalties, values, and ideas. In post-colonial times India, like other newly liberated states, found it hard to resist the allure of secularism. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and others after him harboured the belief that a forward-looking society with a socialist state at the helm should progressively distance itself from religion. This belief was widely shared by the educated classes responsible for running influential institutions. In the first decades of independence, India seemed to be progressing steadily on this path, its rulers focusing on economic and social development towards the building of a “Nehruvian State” (Brass 1990; Nayar 2001). However, even during those times, there were forces opposed to Nehruvian secularism that were constantly working in favour of the religious impulse as a means to political dominance.

Nehruvian secularism, as espoused subsequently by leaders from within his political party, the Congress, has a complex lineage, quite distinct from the Western notion of a secular state. Rather than aiming towards a complete separation of religion from the state, as in the USA, the secularism of post-colonial India has based itself



on the idea of equal treatment of various religious communities by the state while safeguarding the interests of minorities. This definition of a secular state required the upholding of “personal laws” among Muslims and other minorities alongside the civil law of the country. A liberal pluralism, where the state itself was seen as not invoking any religion, was an ideal that the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar aspired towards, and it was on their insistence that the word “secular” was added to the preamble of the Indian constitution – some would say as an afterthought, since this most detailed constitution of the world did not really define the term. The practice of this notion of secularism in post-independence India indicates that a complete separation of state and religion has never happened, and that in fact it has never been on the national agenda. Frequent acts of mass violence in the name of religion, the lack of an ecclesiastical structure within both Islam and Hinduism, as also communal tensions in the aftermath of Partition required the Indian state to frequently intervene in religious matters. Optimally, the secularism of India denotes the obligation of the state to ensure the well-being of all religions. The foundations of this liberal pluralism in the guise of a secular outlook were laid on privileging minorities with constitutional provisions in order to safeguard their religious practice.

This divergence in viewpoints on secularism between India and the West, between Nehruvian, dalit, and right-wing politics, comes from the diversity and multiplicity within India and, especially, within Hinduism. Hindus historically did not all share what was supposed to constitute a religion, such as creed, deity, ritual, or text. Those that wished to promote a Hindu identity, consequently, had a problem that appears the reverse of Christianity’s in secular times. They had to assert the existence of a common religion and give it an overarching status when, for more than a millennium, there was little that linked the various sects and faiths in the subcontinent. For instance, there was no thread that united “caste Hindus” and the so-called untouchable castes.

Meanwhile, external threats, such as missionaries, “secularists”, and above all “Muslims” took time to invent. To bring together all the disparate elements under the umbrella of a Hindu identity was a time-consuming project.

Over almost two decades after the end of British rule, Nehru’s popularity and dominance ensured some distancing between politics and religion. But, as Berglund (2013) has pointed out, this secular model began to crumble in the 1970s when the Congress Party was challenged for the first time and new identities based not on ideology but on religion and ethnicity began to emerge (Jaffrelot 1996; Madan 1997; Gupta 1985; Kohli 1992). Various forces mobilised these identities, resulting in political unrest and separatist claims within several states. Followed in 1975 by the Indira Gandhi “Emergency”, they resulted in a further reorientation of national politics whereby political parties, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), began to draw political inspiration increasingly from religion (Malik and Singh 1995; Ghosh 1999). The rise of the BJP parallel with what are projected as the leitmotifs of modernity – globalisation, economic growth, the spread of education and industrialisation – confirms the failure of modernisation theory. The most significant aspect of the BJP’s success, as of now, has been the party’s ability to make religion and nationalism compatible in the eyes of large sections of the educated Hindu middle class.

In India’s 2014 general election, almost seven decades after independence, the notion of a modern secular government not relying on religious mobilisation for political gain, and not employing religious symbolism to win political support, suffered a body blow with the BJP, inspired by its right-wing “Hindutva” worldview, sweeping the polls. The BJP had constantly criticised the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the Congress, of practising what it called “pseudo-secularism”, which it argued the UPA had achieved by privileging Muslim interests (i.e. the constitutional privilege given to Muslim personal law) above the interests of the nation’s Hindu majority. This, the BJP argued, was

“vote-bank politics”, and in 2014 it won them an absolute majority. Narendra Modi, who had led the tirade against his hapless adversaries – with his party people coining the oft-repeated phrase “sickular” to berate the Congress – swiftly overcame a semblance of opposition within his own party to become prime minister. With the swearing in of Modi as the country’s sixteenth prime minister (his party had an absolute majority after decades of coalition governments), the secular dreams of India’s founders – as well as of those who thought decades of material progress, industrialisation, and global flows would enfeeble the claims of ethnicity – seemed to have been shattered. The ideal of equal understanding and respect for all religions was now effectively replaced by the rule of a majority that could choose how tolerant it wanted to be of other faiths. In the various interpretations of secularism that have prevailed in India, religion, rather than disappearing from political discourse, has remained centrestage – even if in varying degrees.

These markedly divergent standpoints on how to interpret secularism, culminating in the BJP’s ascension, point towards the growing rather than diminishing significance of religion in political and social life. Modi’s victory has merely reaffirmed the fact that advocates of modernisation were incorrect in their assessment that religion would vanish from public life and politics. Modi, more than anyone else, has been responsible for bringing religion to the foreground by arguing that if one is a devout Hindu, one is by default secular. Sax (*ibid.*) has pointed out that modernisation theory has been criticised for its “explicitly teleological orientation (that is, its assumption that there is a single universal form of modernity toward which all societies tend to progress) and for its assumption of a universal rational subject.” Empirically, it is evident that the spread of education, the expansion of democratic institutions, and increased economic opportunity have in no sense diminished claims to ethnic diversity and religious practice.

India’s ethnic and religious diversity is evident from the manner in which the cult of Mahasu in Jaunsar-Bawar is still living out its particular customs and ritual organisation, practising its ancient

rites, and carrying on its ancestral traditions. None of this seems to conflict with the cult's robust participation in Nehru's or Modi's democracy, even if at times this is done through seemingly archaic rituals of oracular possession and royal processions. For these inhabitants of the mountains – for whom the main occupations have for centuries been transhumant pastoralism and subsistence agriculture – the political, the religious, and the economic are so enmeshed that they defy segregation. For instance, Mahasu, the deity worshipped in the temple at Hanol, is also the political figurehead, a divine king who controls territory and collects taxes through a bureaucracy appointed by him, while holding court through his designated oracles. His temples also double as spaces of healing. In them oracles “cure” possessions afflicting Mahasu's subjects, and pronounce punitive measures against those violating the codes of Mahasu citizenship. For a society gradually moving from pastoralism to agriculture, it was imperative to protect lands from competing groups, and thus Mahasu also maintained a militia to protect pasture and farm, and in turn the economic interests of the temple and the community.

Mahasu represents a unique political and social system. Here, a presiding deity, an idol, is accepted as divine king. The system has not only survived the arrival of modernity but also adapted to it in a manner that is *sui generis*. Even today, the divine king travels constantly, carried in elaborate processional rituals to habitable spaces that come under his jurisdiction. The travel is undertaken by carrying idols in box-like palanquins, locally referred to as *palqi*. The palanquins are carried on the shoulders of the divine king's possessed subjects and oracles, at which time the deity is said to be in procession. Divine kings, being idols, speak to their subjects indirectly through these oracles, who are specially appointed to articulate the wishes of the divine king, while possessed. The lands that a divine king can traverse, overcoming challenges from neighbouring deities, are considered to have been annexed to the kingdom, and people have been socialised over generations to

think of themselves as Mahasu subjects. Sax (2006) and others have pointed towards the existence of a widespread “system” of Western Himalayan kingship where the small mountain kingdoms are either ruled by humans acting as “managers” to sovereign state deities, or are territories “ruled” by deities whose ritual processions create and define the territory over which the deity rules. This form of politico-religious organisation, referred to by Sutherland (1998) as “government by deity”, could have preceded the polities where human kings ruled over kingdoms.

Divine kingship is still current practice in these mountains, with the two temples across the River Tons indicating a continuing political tug-of-war between “ruling” deities. The four Mahasu siblings – two minor ones on either bank (Basik and Pabasik) serving as opposing forces with Bautha Mahasu as the fulcrum; one sitting in the cult capital at Hanol; and the forever journeying Chalda Mahasu – are allied to each other when facing challenges from other divinities, human kings, colonial officials in the past, and modern governments now. However, conflicts among the four are not uncommon, owing largely to the loyalties of clansmen on opposite banks of the Tons who consider themselves descendants either of the Kauravas or the Pandavas (the squabbling cousins from the Mahabharata) and describe themselves as belonging alternatively to the moieties of the *sathi* and the *pansi*.

In 1998, while Chalda Mahasu was touring the remote Himalayan region of Duni-Bhitri on the north bank of the Tons, the deity decided – the decision was articulated through his oracle – to extend his stay to three years, against the customary halt of a year, at Bhitri. As the new millennium approached, his oracle announced that Mahasu would need a new palanquin. These palanquins are usually gilded with pure silver, and smiths had to be invited from neighbouring Kumaon to mould a vehicle befitting the divine king. Money for the several kilogrammes of silver metal required had to be raised. Once the royal mount was ready, the deity, rather than proceeding to the destination next on the

itinerary, i.e. to a hamlet called Kashdhar in Himachal Pradesh, decided to travel towards Thadiyar facing the temple at Hanol, the procession eventually arriving there in the year 2000. This was the year the state of Uttarakhand (then Uttaranchal) came into existence.

Chalda Mahasu now set up camp at a spot overlooking the temple of Hanol on the other bank, at Thadiyar, and ordered the construction of a temple. The deity made it amply clear that his procession would not travel further until the temple was ready. The reason given for this was the deity's desire to check the misappropriation of temple finances in the temple at Hanol.

Most temple officials were tight-lipped, but when I persisted in my efforts to know what financial improprieties had been committed at the Hanol Temple, an elder from the village council of *pansi* agreed to speak. Historically, both factions had equal rights over the offerings made by pilgrims in the temple at Hanol. The

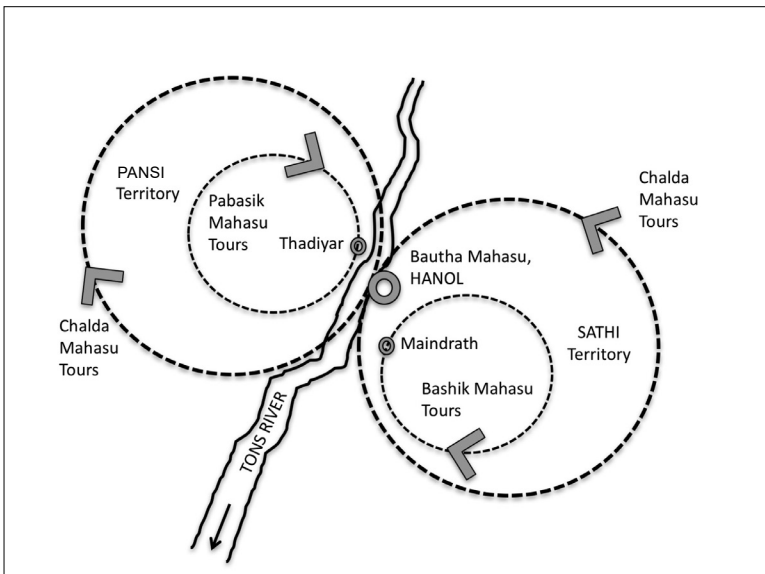


Fig. 1.1: Mahasu territories as described by tours of the divine kings.

Mahasu council at Hanol had, in accordance with the oracle's pronouncements, contributed ingots of gold from the divine king's treasure to the Indian war effort during the Indo-China conflict in 1962. This act typified Mahasu's kingly demeanour – like a king coming to the aid of an ally, Mahasu had gifted wealth to the Government of India to avert a crisis that could harm both. By the time the gold was delivered, the war had ended and the Indian government duly returned the gold. While people had seen the gold go out of the deity's treasure, they had not seen it return. The administration of temple treasures is the responsibility of the Mahasu-appointed minister, the *vazir*, one on each bank. The responsibility of returning the gold, in this instance, fell on the minister of *sathi*. Following remonstrations from the other faction, the *sathi* declared that since the divine king's temple lay in their territory, the *pansi* had no right to question grants and receipts. They went to the extent of installing locks on the treasure chests where the devout made offerings at the temple of Hanol, to prevent the *pansi* from collecting their share. When the *pansi*'s patience ran out, they installed their own treasure chests for pilgrims from their region to make offerings at the temple. As a counter to this move, the chieftains of the *sathi* got together and decided to assert their rights over the temple at Hanol. They rolled the *pansi* chests over the mountainside and tossed them into the river.

The *pansi* were at their wits' end. They could not muster enough numbers to retaliate against the aggression of the opposite faction, nor was violence a feasible option under the democratic government's administrative dispensation. They knew that filing a law suit to restore their rights would enrage the divine king. Even if they did file a law suit in a civil court, it would take years to get a decision. If they decided to seek divine justice at the Hanol temple, the oracle from the opposing faction would be the medium of adjudication. The choices were uninspiring and wider consultations were needed to save face.

A large council of elders, with delegates from as far as Shimla and Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh, was called, and they decided to meet the district magistrate of Dehra Dun, the government administrator, with a list of complaints against financial irregularities at the Hanol Mahasu Temple. Also appended was a list of malpractices, such as animal sacrifice and the exploitation of lower castes by officials at the Hanol Temple, practices that had been declared unlawful by the administrative machinery in the past. The *pansi* also lobbied with the district administrator of Uttarakashi. The two civil servants met and decided that the law of the land needed to be imposed on the temple. At the opportune moment, delegates from Shimla presented to the civil servants copies of the temple management laws enacted by the government of the neighbouring state, Himachal Pradesh. These laws outlined a mechanism for the utilisation of temple funds for the welfare of pilgrims by temple committees. Soon, government officials brought the Hanol Temple under a new temple management committee, the *pansi* further earning the ire of their brethren on the opposite bank.

On the banks of the Tons, meanwhile, the moment Chalda Mahasu arrived, his oracle expressed the deity's desire for the construction of a new shrine, within sight of the temple at Hanol. The divine king's bureaucracy, and the clan heads or elders, the *sayanas*, not too enthused at the prospect of further aggravating an already tense situation, offered the excuse that there was no abode suitable enough for the deity to stay in this little settlement. The carriers of the palanquin of Chalda Mahasu, almost on cue, moved into the home of Jai Pal Singh Panwar, the divine king settling down in the home of his minister, which was instantly vacated and converted into a shrine. Chalda Mahasu's insistence and intent gave his subjects the courage to go ahead with the challenging project of building a temple overlooking the imposing shrine at Hanol. The divine king had taken upon himself the task of restoring the dignity of one group of subjects, violated by the other,



even as both groups claimed his tutelage. But was this going to be *pansi's* Hanol, a new power centre asserting the political will of the *pansi*? Whatever the fate of this new shrine, divine politics was at work with a view to restore the delicate balance of power between the two factions.

Very soon, the temple had reached plinth level and wood was now needed for the columns and the roof. Residents petitioned the officials of the government forest department to grant permission to fell trees in the nearby forests. The official responsible, the forest ranger, cited the ban on tree felling in the forests and refused permission. Chalda Mahasu's devotees, however, entered the forests in violation of the ban and brought the requisite wood. The forest ranger, providentially, was called away for a meeting to Dehra Dun. On his return, the ranger noticed the missing trees, made inquiries, and issued legal notices to the offenders. Very soon, inexplicable mishaps in the ranger's family forced him to seek the help of Chalda Mahasu's *mali*, the oracle, to resolve his domestic crisis. The oracle struck a deal and the notices were quietly withdrawn. This is a familiar pattern in Mahasu country and in this manner, with the divine king's wrath often afflicting government officials, the Mahasu polity manages to evade and trounce the legal system, retaining its political and social relevance.

The foundation stone of a Mahasu temple is laid at the command of the oracle and the temple, once finished, is consecrated in a grand ceremony that resembles a coronation. The allies of the divine king, human and divine, are all present in state and, as is usual with political pageants – who sits where, who arrives when and how close one can get to the deity – defines political power. For the Thadiyar consecration, Chalda Mahasu, because he was in Pabasik Mahasu's territory, involved the divine king and his bureaucracy in the organisation of the event. As the temple neared completion in June 2003, invitations were extended to all major and minor divinities within the realm. Several came in their palanquins, brought to the ceremonial site in processions by their

subjects. However, the ones that were invited and yet preferred to stay away caught everyone's attention. The reasons for their absence were debated throughout the ceremony.

Both Chalda and Pabasik Mahasu received the invited divinities at the doorway of the temple courtyard. When it was the turn for the palanquin of the deity Kaul Kedari of Village Salra, Chalda Mahasu refused to come forward for the welcome. The affront was registered instantly and Kaul Kedari decided to pitch his tent away from the temple quadrangle, aloof from where all the other deities were settling to witness the ceremonies. Once the temple consecration was over and all the deities had left, Chalda Mahasu recommenced his processional tours. Buli Das, the drummer-bard of another deity, Raja Karna, in the neighbourhood of the Mahasu kingdom, observed that in their invocations, recited like genealogies of Chalda Mahasu, his drummer-bards had begun to omit Kaul Kedari's name. The deity was definitely out of favour!

When the officials of the Mahasu siblings on the other bank from Hanol received invitation cards for the consecration, the divine kings announced through their oracles their disinclination to participate. They clearly perceived the ceremony as a challenge to their authority. Priests and other officials raked up the issue of how the faction on the other bank had once sought a share of the offerings from the temple at Hanol, forcing them to say, "We will not grant you a share, for the temple lies in our territory. The capital of the kingdom is ours and we shall not give up our rights over it." And then, tongue in cheek, adding insult to injury, "This temple is ours. Create another Hanol for yourselves, if you can!"

Thus, the consecration of a new temple across the river was being seen, between the rival factions the *sathi* and the *pansi*, the sixty Kauravas (as in local folklore) and the Pandava siblings, as a challenge to the age-old *sathi* domination of the cult, an attempt to create another power centre. As a result of the rivalry, Basik Mahasu, rather than himself travelling to the ceremony, sent only

his officials, that too to Hanol and not the consecration site. The officials remained in Hanol on the other bank, witnessing the consecration from across the river. This was also done in order to honour the convention of Basik Mahasu not violating Pabasik Mahasu's territory. On the other hand Bautha Mahasu, who is seated and does not travel, sent only his emblem, his *nisan*, against the customary silver coin sent by the Mahasus to each other's temple consecrations.

On 5 June 2003, at the consecration, the emblems of Bautha, and the palanquins of Pabasik and Chalda Mahasu, were ceremonially brought to the temple site and placed on a pedestal under the direction of the Mahasu minister. The oracles of the three deities also sat next to the emblems, possessed by the deities. During the ceremonies, the oracles assured the large audience of their resolve to protect the region, stressing unity. They consecrated the temple as a place of devotion to all four Mahasus.

Once the ceremony was under way, with several deities in attendance, its ritual framework became a bone of contention. While Pabasik Mahasu, the host, had announced his intentions (through his oracle) of honouring the government diktat on animal sacrifice and would henceforth desist from it, Chalda Mahasu would not accept this proposal. Another deity from further upstream, Serhkuriya of Duni-Bhitri, announced through his own oracle that animal sacrifice (*bali*) would indeed be essential for the consecration to be efficacious. However, he also announced that the wishes of the host ought to be taken into consideration in deciding upon the course of action. With Chalda Mahasu insisting on the performance of rituals according to his secret knowledge of *tamasik puja* and the rituals of animal sacrifice, the palanquins of Chalda Mahasu and the deities that accepted animal sacrifice, including Serhkuriya of Duni-Bhitri, got pride of place inside the inner sanctum. On the other hand, the vegetarian deities, including the host, remained seated outside the shrine even as several goats were sacrificed on the temple roof.

Rituals such as these, where stately protocol meets pomp and pageantry, and where groups within communities confront each other over “reform”, such as the giving up of animal sacrifice, clearly point towards their contemporary political gravity. Folklore and records from the neighbouring kingdoms tell us that in pre-colonial and colonial times too, the Mahasu cult was associated with powerful polities, with the divine king sharing borders with other divine or human kings. The kingdom was created through the performance of mass rituals of possession and procession, organised on behalf of the deities by officials appointed for the purpose. While Chalda Mahasu is constantly travelling in processions organised by his temple officials, the other siblings too move – once they are invited to host villages. Their visits are needed, even as evil spirits come to possess people. This is when the divine kings, to exorcise the possessed, possess the Mahasu oracles.

It was these rituals, including blood sacrifices and caste segregation – even head-hunting until not very long ago – that negotiated social and political boundaries and translated into acts that would fall within the ambit of Sutherland’s (ibid.) “government by deity”. Even though practices such as head-hunting have long disappeared and new modes of living – owing to education, roads, mobile phones, and commercial agriculture – have been adopted, Mahasu retains power over his subjects. The subjects still consider it obligatory to participate in his rituals of divine kingship, and unquestioningly accept the power of the deity to alter their world. It is these strong allegiances that translate into political power for the divine kings.

Despite the fact that many disputes between the deities and their officials are now being adjudicated in law courts, the divine kings’ subjects continue to converge to their shrines, seeking justice delivered by possessed oracles under the watchful eyes of temple officials. Healing by exorcism of people possessed by spirits is a common sight in all Mahasu shrines. In fact, such is the strength