



Sanctum Sensorium: the travelling deities of the Kullu Valley, India

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Territorial deities that can travel, speak, dance and bathe are integral part of the indigenous traditions of the Kullu Valley in the Indian Himalayas. These deities are active social beings whose existence is associated with action, particularly the movement of their chariots or *raths*. This photo essay explores how the *rath* becomes a vital symbol of divine corporeality and how it performs the deity's identity in front of its followers. Created and carried by its followers, the *rath* not only materializes the deity's relationship with its followers, but also performs its identity through behavioural patterns rooted in oral traditions. This idea is discussed through the example of the bathing ritual of the deity Naag Dhumbal where the deity's human-ness is highlighted. The journey of the deity and its followers comes across as an important way of projecting the deity's identity and accessibility. Divine presence, in its tangible form, is achieved through the cumulative effect of reverberating music, incense, movement and touch. The pictures attempt to enable a level of visualisation of the deity's physical presence generated through an intense sensory experience, at the centre of which is the deity's moving *rath*.

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Located in the Western Himalayan region of Northern India, the Kullu Valley¹ sustains indigenous traditions that revolve around territorial deities, known as the *devi-devta* (lit. goddesses-gods). Kullu currently has over five hundred deities, each of which governs their own territories, assisted by a committee constituting an administrator, storekeeper, cashier, priests, and musicians. The deities can also directly engage with the village community by ritually possessing the person chosen as the deity's medium, or *gur*. Other than the *gur*, the deity's chariot or *rath* is also used to invoke the deity's 'unmediated', tangible presence within the community. This photo essay showcases the deity's *rath* as a vital instrument for the performance of its identity and a multi-sensory expression of divine corporeality. While the *gur* is the verbal medium for the deity, it is the *rath* that 'becomes' the deity and performs its physical actions. Hence, it is the most important signifier of the deity's active social presence and agency and its relationship with the village community. The *rath* also enables the deity to travel, maintain local kinship networks and practice its agency in Kullu's socio-political milieu.

1. Kullu Valley is in the administrative district of Kullu, located in the state of Himachal Pradesh in India.

An aspect of the *rath* I find particularly interesting is that the deity is able to stage protests personally or directly confront the state administrative authorities or political leaders when it needs to. An important deity in this respect is Naag Dhumbal. In the essay, I discuss Naag Dhumbal's recent bathing ritual to illustrate how the movement and materiality of the *rath* humanizes the deity and also reinforces, through touch, music, movement and speech, the sense of his presence among his followers.



Picture 1: Here, the *rath* of the deity Kuinri Mahadeu is greeting the Kuinr village women during the annual Palaich Festival.

The Rath

The deity's *rath* is a wooden palanquin² decorated with colourful tapestry, silver and gold ornaments, yak hair, currency-note garlands, and *moharas*, bust-like icons made of precious metals. The wooden frame of the *rath* stands on two elongated poles so that two or four people can carry it. While the *rath* is common to most deities across Kullu, there are regional variations in its overall structure and design. Each individual *rath* also has its own design and personality to distinguish it from others. For instance, Naag Dhumbal's *rath* has a cylindrical loop made of silver, which encircles a golden disk at the top. This ornament is unique to his *rath*, making it easy to identify. Nevertheless, in rituals involving multiple deities, each *rath* carries a tag showing its name and village.

Along with the deity, the chariot also represents the village it comes from. The sense of collective identity that the village associates with its deity materializes in the *rath*. Its constituents are commissioned by its followers, either individually or collectively. The matters pertaining to the *rath* involve participation and contribution from all members of the village community, who take special care of the *rath*'s appearance. During a ritual at Koon village, in Kullu, I was told that "if the *rath* looks good, then it adds to the name

2. *Rath* in Hindi refers to a chariot. However, the deity's *rath* is actually a palanquin, *pālki* in Hindi. Nevertheless, in Kullu, these palanquins are referred to as *rath*, and I have retained the same term.



Picture 2: Raths seated, wearing name tags, near a temple at Simsa, where the deities were invited for a consecration ritual in November 2021.



Picture 3: Naag Dhumbal's rath in its tent during the Kullu Dussehra held in October 2021.

of our village”. Discussion was underway about whether one of the *rath*'s ornaments³ should be upgraded from silver to gold. It was decided that every family in the village should contribute a sum that would vary according to how much the family could afford. Everyone would have a say in how the ornament would be fashioned. This process is used in the creation of all the main elements of the *rath*.

Once completed, the main components of the *rath*, such as the wooden structure, the icons and some of the jewellery, are individually consecrated before being added to the main body of the chariot. Daniela Berti, in her study of the chariots in Kullu (Berti 2004), discusses how the *rath* represents the deity only after it has been completely assembled by the attendants– the “divine presence” of the deity is “delocalised and distributed” (Berti 2004: 87) among the elements that form the *rath*. The active involvement of the village community in the creation and functions of the *rath* highlights their sense of ownership towards it. This stands out as an important aspect of the relationship between the deity and its followers, in which each supports the existence of the other.



Picture 4: The “standing” *rath* of deity Naag Dhumbal during Kullu Dussehra in October 2021.

Existence in Action

The chariots are assembled during festivals and on special occasions where the deity’s participation is sought. Once picked up, the *rath* is considered to be “standing” – the deity is free to move around and communicate through gestures. It is believed that a *rath* directs its own movements while its bearers simply follow the deity’s lead⁴. The moving chariot allows the deity to meet with other deities, dance, move forward or backwards to express consent or disagreement, or violently launch itself in a show of fury. Every time the chariot moves,

3. In this case, it was a *chhatra* or small umbrella-like headgear made of precious metal.

4. In most cases, the bearers are men. However, there have been rare occasions where women have picked up the *rath* for very short periods of time.

it must be accompanied by the music played by the deity's personal musicians or *bajantari*, who synchronize the rhythm of their music to the movement of the deity's *rath*. The music, known as *devdhun* (lit. god's tune), is perceived as inseparable from the *rath*'s movement. I have often seen chariots moving aggressively towards the musicians if the music stops while the *rath* is still moving, signalling the musicians to resume playing.



Picture 5: Deity Kartik Swami's (to the right) chariot tilts as it greets his guest, Bijli Mahadev (left).

The music accompanying the deity is usually intense and reverberating. The rising and falling rhythms of the numerous drums played alongside enormous wind instruments, together with a moving *rath*, animate the surrounding atmosphere and make it tangible. As a spectator, it was interesting to see how music can give rise to a sense of touch. The amalgamation of sound and action turns the deity's presence into a riveting sensory experience of the idea of divine corporeality. In addition to these aspects, the *rath* also performs the human-ness of the deity through its movements. I observed a fine illustration of this through the deity Naag Dhumbal. In the following sections, I will discuss this deity's projected personality during his journey to the hot springs in Vashisht village in November 2021.

Naag Dhumbal

Naag Dhumbal is among the best-known deities of the Valley, popular for his confrontational and hands-on methods for solving problems. On many occasions, his *rath* has stormed into the Deputy Commissioner's office or the police headquarters in Kullu, demanding swift resolution from the state-run administrative authorities in cases where the wellbeing of the deity community has been affected. During large-scale festivals such as the Kullu Dussehra⁵, the *rath* moves around the festival ground regulating the crowd to

5. The Dussehra in Kullu is an annual seven-day festival where over 300 deities from different parts of the Kullu district assemble at the festival ground at Dhalpur.



Picture 6: The deity's musicians announcing its arrival.



Picture 7: Naag Dhumbal's chariot signalling the musician (the *dhaunsi*) to play the *devdhun*.



Picture 8: Naag Dhumbal's rath crossing the Beas river near Goshal village during his bathing tour in November 2021.

ensure the smooth conduct of the main rituals. This has earned Naag Dhumbal the popular title of “traffic police”. The deity’s *rath* draws a lot of spectators curious to witness its exceptional and much-talked-about agility and its dramatic swaying to show anger.

The prefix ‘naag’ in Naag Dhumbal means ‘snake’ in Hindi. The name Dhumbal comes from the local oral traditions, specifically, the story of eighteen snakes born in Goshal village near Manali. The story revolves around eighteen snakes that had been kept in an earthen vessel called a *bhalndal*, which is popularly considered to symbolise their mother. One day, a woman, unaware of the snakes’ existence, opened the vessel and, frightened on seeing the snakes inside, dropped the ladle-full of burning coal that she had been carrying. To save themselves, the snakes fled in different directions and founded their own territories across the Kullu valley, where they became revered deities. One snake, who turned black due to the fire, became known as Kali (lit. black) Naag; another, who lost an eye, became known as Kalna (lit. one-eyed) Naag. Naag Dhumbal gets his name from being covered in smoke⁶. The deity’s aggressive temperament and his chariot’s tendency to move violently is often attributed to the smoke, which has made him restless.



Picture 9: Naag Dhumbal’s *rath* at Goshal.

In November 2021, the deity and his followers travelled to the hot springs in the Vashisht village near Manali for the deity’s bath. This ritual was happening after five years on the occasion of the consecration of the deity’s temple ground in Peeh village. The procession of about two hundred people walked for two days to reach the temple in Vashisht. At least one person from each family within the deity’s jurisdiction had to be part of the journey. At Vashisht, the priest cleaned the chariot with water from the sulphur springs. The entire process of bathing and praying took about two hours, during which the accompanying people went to the public baths fed by the same springs. On the way to Vashisht, Naag Dhumbal had stayed overnight at Goshal, where he was born.

6. The name Dhumbal has been associated with the Hindu word *dhuaḷn* or smoke.



Picture 10: Naag Dhumbal's *rath* titled towards the temple at Goshal (right of centre), as the deity greets his mother before leaving the village.

Any Naag deity born from the earthen vessel in Goshal has to stop at their mother's village during their journey as a show of respect. The next morning, when it is time to leave, the *rath* does not exit the village as easily as it had arrived. The villagers believe that the deity refuses to leave his mother – he has to be persuaded through chants, music, or even verbally to return to his own village. However, the deity's urge to stay persists, and the *rath* does not move ahead. It is then time for the women of Peeh, who have accompanied the deity, to sing a *laman*, or prayer, to lead the unwilling deity gently out of Goshal.

The same process of coaxing the deity plays out when the *rath* has to leave the temple at Vashisht. It is believed that the *rath* is held back by the spirits or *joginis* who live in Vashisht – “he is their guest, they want him to stay back. If the *rath* is taken away forcefully, then the deity's spirit gets left behind, and all we are left with is an empty *rath* with no power”, I was told by one of my interlocutors. The process of escorting the deity's chariot away from the temple is an elaborate ritual. The spectacle and drama of this departing procession are overwhelming in their sensory impact. The *rath*'s movement in response to the women singing the *laman*, or its unwillingness to leave Goshal and Vashisht, contextualises Naag Dhumbal's human-ness in specific events of sentimental significance. The purpose of the exercise was to bathe the deity, but it was during the journey to and from Vashisht that the deity's person unfolded most poignantly.

Through this photo essay, I have attempted to discuss the kinesthetics of the deity's presence as projected through the *rath*. I have dealt with the ways in which the village deities' agency in the society is demonstrated through their chariots. For the followers, the *rath* becomes a symbol of collective intervention for a swift resolution of their problems. In describing Naag Dhumbal's recent journey, I have tried to show how, for his followers, the deity is a member of their family, who looks after them, populates their everyday lives, and guides them through crucial decisions. I have also discussed how the elements of the procession



Picture 11: The deity's *gur* or medium (the man in the white tunic) beginning the rituals at the temple in Vashisht.



Picture 12: The *rath* refusing to leave the temple at Vashisht.



Picture 13: Women of Peeh village walking backwards, singing the *laman* to Naag Dhumbal, telling the deity that it is time to go home.

collectively create what could be called sanctum sensorium – a sense of divine presence stimulated by an intense overall sensory experience.

References:

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