Stately (Dis)Placement: Narrative, Place, and Postcoloniality

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Introduction

Miracles are singular events. They defy the logic of repetition and exist outside normative practices and rationalities. Throughout the Western Himalayas miracles (pratyakśa) sanction speech acts and tie deities to local places. Stories of deities’ miraculous deeds are a common part of god talk here. They circulate in communities providing the narrative cement that binds deities to their communities; however, modern state governance is fast transforming these relations. Increasingly, it is not the miracles that authorize the deities and their places but deities uprooted from their places that authorize the state. This paper suggests the growth of modern state governance coupled with Himachali regionalism have transformed relations between deities and place. I will suggest there is a move from narrative strategies linking specific deities to specific places (bushes, springs, caves) and authorized by the discursive force of miracles (pratyakśa) to abstract deities decoupled from places authorizing the

hegemony of the modern state. We trace this transformation progressively through a series of examples.

We begin with a story that examines a deity located in the soil contacted by reciting place-names linked to his past. The second example represents a shift from power oriented narratives to pedagogical ones. While the deity of this story has a temple and a set of narratives that link it to local spaces, he also has other temples and broader narratives link sometimes distant places. The third example examines two conflicting narratives, one linked to migrating herders and another to a royal polity. In the closing section of the essay, we see how deities have become stripped of their places, authorizing the cultural authenticity of the state.

In the academic study of religion, place is an important category of analysis. It is central to the creative work of historians of religion such as Eliade, Smith, and Gill. This paper will not debate the relative merits of these positions. Instead, I suggest discussions of religion and place could profit from examining how postcolonial state formations affect religion and place. I suggest modern state forms, which link remote regions institutionally and ideologically, dislocate deities from place. In so doing, they not only strip deities of their geographic specificity, they also transform them into a standing reserve for mobilization by state ministries. This does not mean that they will become obsolete as the naïve social theories of the midtwentieth century presumed. It means the relational structures between deities and their places will be translated into new structures. My fieldwork has


3 For an excellent overview, see Gill, “Territory.”

sought to understand how these transformations have taken place in the Western Himalayas.

**Devbāṇi and the transformation of narrative strategies**

Across the Western Himalayas, there are words in many languages announcing the topic of this essay. Here I refer to these performance narratives as devbāniṣ (stories of god).\(^5\) By this I mean both devata stories circulated in informal settings and the more technical ritual meaning of the term. The devbāṇi has ritual and narrative functions. The ritual function of the devbāṇi provides access to the presence of the deity through the recitation of place-names associated with the devata, while narrative educates its listeners about the history of the deity.

As one might expect, the narratives always begin with the miraculous birth of the deity. The word prakāṭ—which means evident, clear, revealed or displayed—is most commonly used to describe these births. Other common terms display a similar semantic range.\(^6\) The connections among visibility, revelation, birth, and the miraculous should not go unnoticed. The miraculous, as discussed inside and outside origin stories, is framed in terms of (in)visibility. The first manifestation of a devata is a miraculous unforeseen event that has yet to be recounted. It is that which provides proof of the deity’s power.

From the initial miracle of revelation, the miracle of birth, these stories tell of struggle and tribulation. These sections of the narratives focus on the establishment (sthāpit) of the deity in its current home. How did the deity arrive? What difficulties did it face? How did it overcome these? Why did it choose this particular place to reside? In short, the geographical narratives provide a map of hardship and struggle through which temples and villages were founded. However, across the swath of stories recited here, we will see a progressive move away from geographic identification and a movement towards delocalization. We will examine multiple dimensions of the devbāṇi. We will examine it as a text circulated and performed outside its generative context, as part of a ritual technology, and as part of a development apparatus.

**(Dis)placing god**

Himachal Pradesh’s economy is predominately agricultural. Accordingly, there are many stories of a farmer’s plow uncovering a deity (Figure 1). Across the state, these narratives are remarkably similar. The story of one deity in the upper regions of the Satluj valley is particular instructive. It shows us a set of themes relating miracles, healing, caste, and farming.

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\(^5\) This was the word used to refer to the class of performances discussed in the outer Seraj area and other areas surrounding the Satluj. In other areas of the Western Himalaya the term devbāṇi can refer to any class of story about the deity or even to anything that the deity says. Other words used to signify the same phenomena are chari or bhārathā.

\(^6\) Some of these include: païda (born, arisen, made evident), utpatti (origin, birth, produced) and utpanna (arise, produced).
Māṭī Singh has a typical 'Pahāṛī' temple overlooking a set of small villages. His temple is often empty, but the courtyard is full of tridents, stones, small images, and nails (Figure 2). This courtyard is the final resting place of exorcised demons. Māṭī Singh’s reputation extends throughout the valley—nearly every person I interviewed nearby had a miraculous story to recount about him—and his origin story is similar to others in the region. The version told below comes from the main temple officiant (kārdār) of Māṭī Singh who is also the primary singer for a large group that travels with the deity. The story goes as follows.

One day, a long time ago, a farmer was plowing his field in the district of Chala when his plow struck something hard. He bent down to look, thinking it was simply a stone. To his amazement, it was a brass face. He took it home hoping he might be able to sell it in the market, but as soon as he picked it up the disasters began. He began to get fits and lose consciousness regularly. His fields became barren and his livestock sick. He called a pandit to his house to discover what had gone wrong. The pandit told him the mask he had found was not simply a piece of metal. It was a devatā that needed to be properly established in a shrine and regularly worshipped. Happily, the villager returned home and built a small shrine for the mask. Initially, he worshipped the devatā daily, but he was busy tending his fields and managing his house and soon forgot about the deity. His problems returned and he returned to the pandit who reprimanded him for forgetting to attend to the deity. His problems stopped from that day forward and henceforth he was a prosperous man. Later, he even placed the
mask in his grain house and from the power of the devatā, it is said the grain in that storeroom increased rapidly.\(^7\)

Condensed in this short story we can see many of the fundamental elements of these narratives. The first is the location of the initial disclosure of the devatā. These stories must be read in relation to farming—with the hopes of increasing crops and proper amounts of rainfall. They are not stories of itinerancy as are the migration or herding stories. They are not part of the political strategies of translocalization that link areas to one another through myths and political affiliations. They are stories about the power of particular spaces and the respect necessary for their sustenance. They are stories of and about farming communities, about the difficulties and pleasures of farming.

These stories also point to the intimate balance between villagers and deities. Himalayan deities are as full of curses as they are of blessings. They can inflict hardship or provide much needed salve. They are real forces affecting the materiality of everyday life. To understand them more, they must be understood as agents and not simply as mental abstractions. These village deities, in particular the ones born from local soils, are demanding; their demands must be met in the terms they have dictated to previous generations. They cannot be tricked, placated, or forgotten. While the main character in the story does not try to trick the deity, or to offer him the mental equivalent of a material offering, he does consistently forget to attend to the deity’s needs. This is a common theme. Devatās are often neglected and thus inflict harm on individuals and communities.\(^7\) These deities must be remembered.

The form of remembrance they are seeking, however, is not name recitation over chai or chillum. The form of interaction that is so important for this deity is ritual possession (khelnā) and the communal exchanges that follow. Possession of the medium (gūr) by the deity is a standard feature of ritual in this region. To impel these states of possession, gūrs recite a particular form of the devbāṇī, lists of place-names. In preparation for the rite, the gūr will begin by saying these names of locations where the deity traveled before arriving at its current home. For Māṭī Singh, the list includes many of the surrounding villages and includes the field where the deity was found. This specialized form of knowledge, sometimes called tantra, is that which allows the gūr special access to the deity and that which allows the deity to reveal itself.\(^8\) Here the devbāṇī is not so much a technique for remembering and replicating the past to educate the population. It is a pragmatic technology linking community to deity through place. This technique is different from that current at another temple in a nearby watershed.

Mahasu\(^9\)

In the mountains of Eastern Himachal Pradesh and Northwestern Uttaranchal the deity Mahasu is well known, differing from most deities known only locally (Figure 3). His fame has even spread to areas as far away as Mandi. Although many insist the name Mahasu is a ‘corruption’ of Mahādev, and

\(^7\) This story of the growth of grain is also connected to the deity’s other name, Badharlu from badhnā, to increase. Personal interview, 4-4-03.


\(^9\) In the section that follows Mahasu is sometimes referred to in the singular and sometimes in the plural. This is because even though there are actually four brothers—all called Mahasu—the brother in Hanol is often taken as a metonym of all four.
thus a form of the great god Śiva, the main stories and primary components of his ritual performances are similar to the smaller deities throughout the region.

The story told below was related to me by a Nāth yogi who lives near to the temple. He is the caretaker of devatā history and an excellent singer. In what follows, I will tell a story of how Mahasu arrived at his current home in Hanol. I tell the story in full because it offers a significant addition to the story told previously. This story is circulated by villagers. It is sung at festivals and is now reproduced in cheap bus stand paperbacks. While this story does have an invocatory form like the Māṭī Singh story discussed above, the popular narrative is widely circulated. The place-names used in the invocatory verse, however, are important markers in the story to come. They include Pujarali, Hanol, Hatkothi, Kalu and Kothla. The story goes as follows.

Sometime after the “Time of the Paṇḍavas,” the region around the Tons River had become infested with demons. The demons were so strong that people were forced to live in hiding, residing in caves and inside trees. The strongest of these demons lived in Kirmir terrorizing people in surrounding villages. Without a choice, the people tried to broker a deal with the demons. The villagers said they would provide a human sacrifice, seven wells of water, and the wheat from seven threshing grounds every six months if the demons stopped their reign of terror. The demons agreed. The relative peace continued for several years until an Unma Bhatt Brahmin from Mandrath reached the point of despair. He had seven sons and had already sacrificed six of them. In the next round of sacrifices he was to sacrifice his final son. One morning the Brahmin’s wife, Kelavati, went to the well to extract water for the Brahmin’s breakfast of chutney and roti. When she looked...
into the well she saw the hairy arms of the monster and began to scream. He grabbed her and she fainted.14

When she woke she looked into her brass pot and saw the four Mahasu brothers who instructed her to send her husband to retrieve them from Kashmir. They had the power to kill these demons. The woman was doubtful, but the deities insisted that they were devatās and not simply a trick of the demon. When she returned from the well she fainted again. She would not wake up and a Brahmin from Khalihan was called. With his Sāñchā,15 he saw that she had been in the shadow of the demon and called for the sacrifice of five animals to cure her. After the sacrifice, she regained consciousness, narrated the entire story, and told her husband to begin his journey.

He traveled to Hatkoti, where he met a man who had traveled to Kashmir in search of the Mahasu in his youth.16 He had left when he was only 12 years old, but the journey had transformed him into an old man. He said the way was dangerous and death was likely, but the Brahmin he was without a choice. He would die without the help of Mahasu. Only Mahasu could save his family. He traveled for many days until he finally reached a valley with a freshwater lake and green grass all around.

He was greeted by Shikudia Vīr, a local devatā, who asked about his journey. He urged the Brahmin not to worry and used his powers of invisibility to hide him. Then the Vīr entered the lake to persuade the Mahasu brothers to leave. Despite his efforts, they did not want to leave. One brother said there was someone outside the lake whose sorrow he could feel and who wanted to take them away. Shikudia denied this, asking them to go to search for such a man. All the protector deities of the Mahasus went outside in search of this man. No one could find them, not even Kayalu devatā. Finally, the four Mahasu came out and the Brahmin confronted them with his tale of death and hardship. Hearing such a grueling tale, the deities decided to travel with the Brahmin on the condition that he provides enough land for each of the brothers once they arrived. He was to return home, persuade the villagers to give up much of their land and have all of them fast for seven days.

The Mahasus blew him back to his village on a powerful wind. When he arrived no one believed his story, but the devatās had given him a flower, which he placed in the local pond (bāvari) causing it to overflow. It flooded all the fields. The villagers now believed the story and began fasting. However, on the final day some of the villagers broke the fast and harmed their protector deities. One of the brothers was cut on the knee, another on his ear and another in his eyes. When the devatās finally arrived, they ordered Kayalu devatā (now located in Mandal) to extract the demon from his lair. Kayalu agreed as long as he was given two sheep in sacrifice (bali).17 This was promised and he brought out the demon who was hastily cut to pieces by Mahasu, but his heart came out of his body and hid in a pond. He then asked for forgiveness and promised never to torment the people again if he was spared. He was thus allowed to live in the upperpart of the Pabbar Valley around Bisar.

When people tell stories of Mahasu they append and elide sections of this narrative, emphasizing events that happened in their region and the deities closest to their families. However, when the various gūrs of these deities and their related deities, such as Kayalu and Banar, recite the origin story as a prelude to ritual possession, like Māṭī Singh, they

14 In shorter versions of this story it is not the demon but the four Mahasus that she sees.
15 Sāñchā is a form of ‘tantric’ practice common in these hills.
16 It is possible that in all of these stories that refer to Kashmir as the origin of deities or peoples that Kashmir refers to any area north of the area of origin. In this case, Hatkothi was likely the boundary of known terrain, beyond which was hostile territory.
17 The man telling this story asserted that this was the origin of animal sacrifice.
recite the place-names where the major events of the origin story occurred. With Mahasu, we should also look beyond the ritual context. These stories can also be read as clues to the political economy of the related communities.

The recent work of anthropologist Peter Sutherland confirms the intimate relationship between location and political economy. In a recent essay Sutherland shows how local deities govern through a system called ‘government by deity’ (devatā kā rāj). His ethnographic work with Mahasu and other regional deities in the area shows how political patterns of association and affiliation are performed through calendrical rites, patterns of patronage, and intraregional travel. He charts these associations showing how deities move between villages, establishing alliances that link villages to one another through the sovereignty of the deity. This chrono-geographic account is supported by my own fieldwork. Moreover, it is clear the sites linked through these performed networks of association are the same sites referenced in the litany of names given before the deity enters the medium.

The combined ritual and narrative functions of the devbāṇi reveal a different relation between religion and place from that suggested by Māṭī Singh. With the Mahasus, it is not a singular place that is important, but a narrative that integrate communities across space. The stories of trials, travels, and fights serve to unify disparate communities with a single narrative enacted by annual rites. By contrast to Māṭī Singh, the Mahasu display a delocalized pattern of territorialization. Here the narratives and their associated rites integrate broader political and social spheres.

Bekhalī


In the steep hillsides overlooking the Beas River Valley near the towns of Sultanpur and Kullu, there is a shrine to the goddess Bekhalī. Like all these deities, she has many origin stories. Traveling in the areas surrounding her shrine, I heard many stories about her birth. In her case, the gaps between these different stories reveal changing relations to space. When I spoke with the people who traditionally managed her temple and assets—the kārā, the gūr, and the singers—I was told the devī prohibited recitation of her story. When I spoke to other newly appointed officials—the ‘manager,’ the tourism department, and the local ruling family—I was given a detailed story ready for publication and promotion.

The goddess and her committee are undergoing a major overhaul. The tourist department and many community members have been giving generously to her treasury. Many of the stone carvings are being restored and new wood carvings are being placed around the temple and the gates. She has a new school bordering to her property, concrete steps from a new parking lot, and a new red and white sign announcing the presence of a major goddess (Figure 4). This overhaul is preparing her to be integrated into both the translocal cult of the Great Hindu Goddess and the heritage tourism industry of Himachal.

19 Reading the transformation in the visual cues, it is clear that the strategy here is to integrate Bekhalī into two broader patterns. The first is the growing cult of the great goddess—announced by the red and white sign—and the tourism circuit announced by the new carvings, the large parking lot, and the concrete steps. For an examination that reads this historical transformation ontologically, see Kathleen Erndl, Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess in Northwest India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).
Figure 4. Bekhalī temple. Notice the change of name on the sign.

Story one

Many people from surrounding villages remember the story once recited by the ġūr, and other temple administrators. Long ago there were two shepherds traveling with their goats. They had come to a place above the Beas while herding goats towards their summer home in the high pastures. One day they discovered a place that seemed special. There was a cave and nearby were thorn bushes (called bekhal) used to repel ghosts and exorcise spirits. When evening came, the men saw two women dancing invitingly in the distance. Lustily, the men chased them, but each time they got close the women would somehow escape. Finally the women disappeared inside the cave (Figure 5). The entrance was tiny and the men were afraid to enter. A voice came from within: “Go to sleep. In your dreams I will reveal who I really am, where I am from, and what I want.” The men were excited, confused, and scared. They had heard stories of demons and witches in these hills and were afraid of being tricked. Then again they had also heard stories of yoginīs who gave men unimagined powers and pleasures. When they went to sleep one of the women revealed her identity. She was a goddess and she demanded that they build her a shrine near the cave and offer her worship. In return, she would bestow protection and blessings on them. They would never have to fear anything again. They could settle in the neighboring area and be assured a prosperous future. When the men awoke they were elated and immediately began to build the shrine.

20 Other excellent examples of origin stories associated with goat herding are the Nau Nāg stories and the story of Sṛṇga rṣi.

21 These stories are a common part of Western Himalayan folklore. For examples, see H. A. Rose, Denzil Ibbetson, and Edward Maclagan, A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province, 3 vols. (New Delhi: Rima, 1985).
The details of the story can vary from person to person. Sometimes there is only one woman; sometimes one is old and the other young; sometimes the goddess is a stone; in still others she is the bush itself. What is clear in all these versions, however, is that she was discovered and established by nomads tending sheep and that her power is connected to the bekhal bush and the cave (Figure 6).

This story, however, is the story currently disseminated by ‘official’ sources. Below, I translate the story as it was recited by a young man who called himself the ‘manager.’

This goddess is in the form of a young girl (kanya). Here, the goddess was reveled (prakāṭ hui) in the place inside [the temple] where the stone (pīṇḍi) is. In this very place, she naturally appeared. Here there is a family named Pālasarā. In the past, they used to take care of the land of the King. This family is called the
mother’s house of the goddess. They saw the playing (khelne) of the goddess in the form of a young girl. Then they saw that the feet of the girl were not touching the earth. They did not understand what was happening. They asked, “Whose daughter is this?” Nearby there was a cave and the girl went inside. Then the goddess told them, “I will tell you in a dream where I am from, how I have come and who I am.” Then this goddess came to them in the dream and said:

‘I am Jagannathi, I have come from Jaganāth. So, build me a temple (ek sthān do).’ One stone (piṇḍi) emerged from the ground and it was established (sthāpit) as a temple. In the past there used to be a large bush of bekhal. This is why the local (sthāniya) people call her Bekhalī. This goddess has a pujārī from Orissa [the home of Jagganath]. The goddess came to him in a vision and said to him: ‘My worship (pūjā) can only be done by a person from Orissa. He then moved his family from Orissa and established his house here."

While many of the details of these stories are similar, there are two important substitutions in the second version. First, we see that the people who established the shrine in the second version are now villagers and part of the royal polity of Kullu.

This minor alteration is part of a common strategy of integrating shrines established by itinerant people into large stable political formations. Second, the new narrators have transformed Bekhalī herself.

In the first version, the dream reveals that she is a goddess and not a demon or an illusion. She is a goddess of that place, connected to the cave and the bush. However, in the second version the concern is to associate her with Jagannath—one of the most important Vaisnava deities in India—and to the broader traditions that link Vaishnavism with the Great Goddess. The royal family of Kullu underwent a process of Vaishnavisation as Mughal power waned in the hills and Raghunāth, also aligned with Jagannath, arrived.

Bekhalī’s origin narrative therefore becomes one more sign of the inextricable links between Kullu and Jagannath. These connections are even more important than they were when Raghunāth arrived. Increasingly, Jagannath is recognized as one of the most powerful deities in India. Visiting his temple in Puri, or anywhere else, is considered meritorious for most Hindus. The Department of Tourism and the state government has taken advantage of these perceptions, advertising a local tradition as an incarnation of a powerful national deity. They combine to the marketing appeal of the Western Himalayan mountainscapes with the spiritual power of a national deity to great effect. This transformation of local traditions is taking place across the


region as several ministries attempt to capitalize on the appeal of local deities.

**Forming Himachal**

In the precolonial and colonial periods the Western Himalayas were politically, culturally and religiously fractured. There were more than thirty different kingdoms with varying degrees of strength and independence. In the colonial period areas such as Shimla, Kangra, Kotgarh and Rawingarh came under direct British rule. Others such as Bushahar and Pangi remained largely autonomous, trading with Western Tibet and often refusing to pay tribute to British tax collectors.

This was the state of affairs in the years surrounding Indian independence. There was only the most nascent of movements to overthrow the princely powers and the areas not controlled by local princes were administered either from Delhi or from Punjab. The early decades of Independence were tumultuous for the Western Himalayas; they saw the growth of robust praja mandal movements and the increasing influence of several ambitious reform-minded politicians, notably Y.S. Parmar. After a series of failed attempts, the state of Himachal Pradesh finally achieved current shape and national recognition in 1971.

Following state recognition, several different ministries were established that sought to integrate the ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse people of the state. Chief among these ministries was the Department of Language and Culture and its more literary cousin the Academy of Art, Language, and Culture. These two institutions are the primary cause of the growth of Hindi history writing in Himachal Pradesh and its implementation by other ministries, notably the Department of Tourism. Initially, they articulated an ambitious project which had two interconnected goals—one archival, the other social. They began by collecting stories and songs from the elders of villages across the state, collating family histories, and translating local texts. These texts were rapidly reproduced in many different media (Figure 7). This reproduction in turn solidified a discourse in which stories confirmed one another because they were basically the same set of stories written by the same small cadre of writers. While the character and content of these writings is the subject of another essay, one of the most important questions they addressed was the relation between the state—as an idea and a structure—and local deities.

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For the English speaking people ‘if there is any way to heaven it is through hell’, but for the Indians the path to heaven ascends from the Himalayas. And the Himalayas with preponderant mountain chains are inhabited by very interesting people with splendid religious history, mythology, folklore and traditions. They hug their primitiveness as much as they embrace the pinnacles of civilization. They present a rare blend of the old and the new. Their myths and rituals speak of their hoary past….The social and religious life on the hills is very much different from the plains. The hill people are neither exclusively Shaiva nor Vaishnava...The hill people rather worship a large number of village gods and goddesses...The western Himalaya is the home of gods and goddesses and of god-fearing people who have respect for all the religions. Their old conventions have never stood in the way of progress in this science dominated world. Their gods never fought for religion. Their fight was always aimed at promoting peace and harmony and feelings of mutual trust among the people.

While Thakur raises all the primary elements of what we might call the master narrative of Himachali nationalism, we will focus on the articulation of Himachal as the land of gods. Thakur begins his work with an assertion that locates Himachal at the center of national and regional soteriology. This equation of Himachal with the land of gods, of spiritual insight, or the gate of heaven is a common trope. One can see it advertised on buses across the state, written on economic policy statements, or hear it in student cafeterias at the State University. As Thakur explores the religious and cultural history of Himachal, he continually reminds us of Himachal’s divine sanction and explains the predominance of divinities in Himachal on these grounds. He begins another work emphatically: “Himachal is the land of gods. Every village here
has its own deity, every deity its own temple and every temple its own radiance.”

In effect, what has happened in Thakur’s work, as in that of most local Hindi writers, is the collation of thousands of local deities with their own histories, ritual patterns, and political alliances into the new state-oriented framework.

As Thakur emphasizes in this quote and throughout his published work, Himachal is a land of natural powers and no one who has spent more than a few days in the Himalayas would argue that these mountains are not sublime. For local historians, the mountainscapes have shaped the social and political life of the state. This is not only because they form the state’s base topography or have defined settlement patterns. It is also something more. Throughout these writings there is an attempt to account for the origins of religion in the region. The most common narrative begins by arguing that when people moved into these hills, they were overwhelmed by the power of the environment they inhabited. There were demons and dangers everywhere. Out of fear and respect, villagers divinized these forces. Thakur explains: “The reason for such a high number of deities in the hills is apparent. It is believable that the earliest settlers and every group of subsequent settlers, occupying that small and hitherto desolate and deserted areas in the thick forests and shrubs which had been the abode of much dangerous and devastating demons, devils and spirits, felt the need of divine protection, searched for the natural forces and established shrines dedicated to the guardians which still survive throughout the land developing a more sophisticated but systematic way of veneration.”

Immediately following the attunement of the migrants to the region’s divine patterns, these people tamed the local demons and began to live in harmony with both demons and gods. The following religious history is a progressive systematization of the original impulse and orientation. As traditions progressed they became more and more attuned to the natural order. This historical development culminated in national recognition of Himachal Pradesh’s autonomy. These narratives, which are as ubiquitous as they are powerful, offer a radical departure from the strategies linking deities to place discussed above.

There are two characteristics that mark the work of writers such as MR Thakur, Mian Goverdhan Singh, and O.C. Handa. The first of these is a close attention to local deities, local stories, and specific histories. The second is the tendency to deny this specificity. Authors such as M.R. Thakur use their localized fieldwork and textual inquiries to extrapolate outward to the entire state. In these narratives, the deities of Kullu valley, of Chamba, or of Nirmand come to stand in for all deities in the area now recognized as Himachal Pradesh. The problem here is more than relating the specific to the general, more than modeling Christian theology. The issue goes to the heart of the deterritorialization precipitated by contemporary state forms.

Here deities are stripped of their connections to bushes, caves, stones, or springs. These transformed gods stand in for all deity relations and can therefore be transported to any site. The problem is not only one of mobilization, political manipulation, and the needs of centralized governance. In this essay, we can follow a transformation in the understanding of deities. There is a movement away from local deities tied to specific locations, material forms, and


natural features, accessed through personal and pragmatic rites to a delocalized divinity abstracted from both place and practice, accessed through the memory work of historiography. This suggests that religious studies scholars interested in relations between religion and place cannot afford to overlook the demands of modern statecraft and the legacies of colonial forms of power/knowledge.