



Book Review

Ehud Halperin. (2019). *The Many Faces of a Himalayan Goddess: Hadimba, Her Devotees, and Religion in Rapid Change*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. xx+297. Price: € 96.20. ISBN 9780190913588. Hardcover.

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Image 12.1: (From Book Cover) Hadimba's Palanquin carried on Devotees' Shoulders on their way to a Festival.
Image Source: Ehud Halperin.

The Many Faces of a Himalayan Goddess: Hadimba, Her Devotees, and Religion in Rapid Change by Ehud Halperin explores the multifaceted nature of the Himalayan goddess Hadimba, the religious practices associated with her, and the impact of rapid societal changes on her worship. The book delves the rich mythology surrounding Hadimba and examines the various manifestations of her divine persona. The author analyses the religious beliefs and rituals of Hadimba's devotees, shedding light on their deep reverence for the goddess and their interactions with her through pilgrimage, offerings, and prayers. Examining the historical and cultural contexts in which Hadimba worship evolved over time, Halperin discusses the impact of globalization, urbanization, and modernization on traditional religious practices, as well as the ways in which Hadimba's devotees adapt to and negotiate these changes. Through a combination of fieldwork, interviews, and scholarly research, *The Many Faces of a Himalayan Goddess: Hadimba, Her Devotees, and Religion in Rapid Change* provides a

comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between Hadimba, her followers, and the evolving religious landscape of the Himalayan region. It also offers readers valuable insights into the dynamic nature of religious practices and the resilience of devotion in the face of societal transformations.

Chapter one, *Getting There*, provides readers with a vivid description of the journey to Kullu Valley, a popular tourist destination in India. Highlighting the significance of Kullu as the capital of the valley since 1660 and the role of the traditional royal family in the region, the author introduces Maheshwar Singh, the oldest male member of the family, who is referred to as the Kullu Raja, who is actively involved in politics and the religious rituals surrounding Hadimba. The chapter takes the reader on a scenic bus journey along the Beas River towards Manali, emphasizing the beauty of the valley with its snow-clad peaks, green forests, terraced fields, and apple orchards. The chapter describes the diverse weather conditions throughout the seasons, that attract tourists. As the bus travels further, signs of tourism become evident, such as shops selling local handicrafts, tourist resorts, and hotels. The author portrays the hustle and bustle of arriving in Manali, with passengers disembarking into a muddy parking lot where they are immediately approached by hotel guides.

The narrative then transitions to the exploration of mountain religion and the *Devta* system prevalent in the region. Halperin explains how the worship of goddesses and gods plays a central role in the lives of the locals. The *Devta* system encompasses various aspects of life, from household rituals and personal worship to village deities and larger temple structures. He provides examples of the different manifestations of the *devtas*, such as their presence in households, sacred locations, and temples. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the influence of *devtas* on religious, socio-political, economic, agricultural, and environmental dimensions of life in the Kullu Valley and even shares an anecdote illustrating the belief in the *devtas*' power to bring about significant changes, as witnessed during the time of the Emergency Rule in India. Overall, the chapter provides a descriptive account of the journey to the scenic Kullu Valley and introduces the readers to the vibrant religious and cultural practices that shape the lives of its inhabitants, through the lens of the *Devta* system.

In the second chapter, *Assembling the Ritual Core*, the author presents readers with an analysis of the goddess Hadimba's significance within the local community, describing the dancing *raths* (palanquins) of Goshali Nag and Hadimba, the possessed man's actions, and the crowd's enthusiastic involvement. The narrative conveys a sense of wonder and curiosity about the events unfolding and the author's interaction with the locals, particularly Lotram that add depth to the narrative and provide readers with different perspectives to the goddess's rituals. One notable aspect of the chapter encompasses an exploration of the concept of complex agency. The author draws upon the work of scholars such as Ronald Inden (1998) and William Sax (2006) to analyse the gods as complex agents, capable of influencing and acting upon the world. This theoretical framework adds depth to the chapter and helps to contextualize the observations made during the rituals.

This chapter also delves the significance of *raths* as vehicles of the gods, and explains the different types of *raths* found in India with a specific focus on *devta* palanquins in the Kullu Valley. The author describes the rituals surrounding the *rath*'s building, its

maintenance, and the transportation of the palanquins used in the worship that represent Hadimba through historical and cultural theoretical frameworks and these details contribute to a richer understanding of the role of her *rath* as a ritual vehicle that manifests the goddess's presence and agency in the world. The collective participation of villagers in producing and maintaining the *rath*, as well as their engagement with it during processions, establishes Hadimba as a focal point and representative of the community. The *rath* becomes a platform for the expression of the community's collective consciousness and will, both internally to themselves and externally for the community.



Image 12.2: (From Book Cover) One of the Metal Faces covering Hadimba's Palanquin, most identified with Her. Image Source: Ehud Halperin

The episode described in the chapter, where Hadimba's *rath* halts and turns back due to conflicting communal desires, demonstrates the centrality of the *rath*'s movements and the negotiation of communal interests. The agreement reached and pronounced by the oracle reflects the goddess's will and leads to a small change in the intercommunal relationship. Furthermore, Hadimba, as a representative of her community, actively promotes social participation, solidarity, and communal identity. Her rituals demand the participation of all social groups, transcending caste, gender, and age divisions. While reinforcing divisions through assigned roles and responsibilities, the rituals emphasize the indispensability of each participant for the proper worship of the goddess.

The goddess and the movement of her *rath* defines the physical boundaries of the village, imbuing it with meaning, and associating her people with their territory. She serves as a protector of the public interest and inspires pride in her devotees, reinforcing their sense of belonging. The belief in the authenticity and divinity of

Hadimba's *rath* is crucial for gaining inclusion in the community. Those who accept the *rath* as the embodied *devta* and participate in the rituals are considered part of the group, while those who do not share this view are seen as the 'Other'. The rituals surrounding the *rath* exemplify religious material culture, shaping beliefs through objects, spaces, practices, and ideas. Additionally, the perpetual assembly and reconstruction of Hadimba, as the *rath* is disassembled and reassembled before each festive event reflects the goddess's essential nature and her multi-faceted aspects, that are represented by the many metal faces decorating her palanquin. Overall, this chapter offers a detailed exploration of Hadimba's role as a complex agent within her community, with the *rath* serving as a significant symbol of her presence, and her embodiment of communal agency that sheds light on her rituals, beliefs, and the social dynamics that revolve around the goddess and her ritual vehicle.

The third chapter, *Narrating the Local Web of Associations*, explores the narrative diversity surrounding the goddess Hadimba that highlights her dynamism shaped by history and influenced by various motivations and constraints. The stories about her emerge from within different contexts that develop divergently, carrying diverse meanings and implications for her role in the lives of her devotees. As a storehouse of fragmented memories and a product of interaction between deities, people, interests, and ideals, her stories reflect historical events, local mythologies, socio-political relationships, and shifts within the notion of divine supremacy. Her mythology also suggests connections with Buddhist and Tibetan religious streams that may have been downplayed over the centuries. Her relationships with various figures and dynasties reflect alliances, power struggles, and negotiations surrounding status and territory.

Furthermore, these mythological narratives show how Hadimba has been patronized and gradually Brahminized and Sanskritized by the rising rulers of the valley. The associated rituals surrounding her, serve to express and maintain local socio-political relations, while also commemorating historical events and processes. The narratives and rituals together document Hadimba's agentive involvement in initiating and furthering historical events and processes, positioning her as a really complex social actor. On the other hand, narrative inconsistencies within her mythology and the way locals explain these indicate the perception of Hadimba as a single, unitary being, despite the diverse stories surrounding her. This suggests a fundamental view of divinity as fragmented, assembled, and occasionally in tension, making it the task of humans to continuously gather these narrative pieces and carry them forward in all their complex forms.

The fourth chapter, *Encountering Epic India*, discusses the transformation of the goddess Hadimba in the context of her historical and cultural associations, particularly her identification with the epic Hadimba and her role as a *rakshasi* (demoness) in the Mahabharata. This mythological layering comes in addition to colonial encounters, followed by state institutions, and finally tourism in the Kullu Valley of India. The author highlights how the perception of Hadimba has evolved over time, shaped by external influences such as by colonial writers and the preference for Sanskrit textual sources. The rise of tourism in the region and the desire of the local people to assert themselves in the pan-Indian context has further contributed to the foregrounding of Hadimba's epic associations. This process has allowed her devotees to reinterpret and embrace her marginality and demonic nature as a source of power and attraction. The author

also touches upon the ambivalence of mountain people towards the plains, as they take pride in their own land and their own way of life that simultaneously seeks alliances and connections with lowlanders. Hadimba serves as a symbol of this ambivalence and the mountain people's fascination with urban, middle-class pilgrims who visit her. This seeming-paradox emphasizes the complex relationship between what is deemed 'periphery' (represented by Hadimba and the mountain people) and the 'centre' (represented by the plains and pan-Indian traditions). Hadimba, like the epic Hadimba, embodies the tension between these two realms, as she is both fascinated by the centre, seeking to become part of it, while at the same time retaining her unique identity as a mountain goddess. Overall, the chapter explores the interplay between local traditions, colonial influences, and the aspirations of the mountain people to establish their place within the larger Hindu and Indian context, constituting an insightful analysis of the transformation of Hadimba and the significance of her worship in its reflection of the socio-cultural dynamics of the Kullu Valley.

The fifth chapter, *Negotiating National Hinduism*, presents an analysis of the tensions between vegetarianism and the bloody sacrifices made to the goddess, significant in the postcolonial context of Modern India, specifically in the region of Kullu. The chapter highlights the historical coexistence of these practices and their supporting ideologies, suggesting an equilibrium that has been disrupted in recent decades due to external influences. The introduction of new material wealth, ideas, agents, and forces has led to a theological, moral, and practical attack on animal sacrifice, particularly the buffalo sacrifice to Hadimba, turning it into a battleground of various conflicts. The author identifies several key intertwined themes within the debate over sacrifices with cosmology, society, ethics, religious freedom, and political sovereignty all equally implicated in this struggle. The clash between traditional lifestyles and the transformative values of capitalist modernity, the challenge to caste-based social hierarchies posed by ideas of social mobility and egalitarianism, and the erosion of communal unity and solidarity through the rising trend towards individualism laced with self-interest, are some important emerging conflicts reflected in the worship of the goddess.

Moreover, this tension extends to the struggle between diverse indigenous forms of Hinduism and Brahmanical ideology, generating resistance from local agents against the criticism levied at it by outsiders and by the state. Hadimba, the goddess who receives these disputed offerings, serves as a symbolic ground for devotees to express and reflect on these multifaceted debates. She is portrayed differently by her followers, with some viewing her as a proud mountain goddess embodying bloodthirstiness, with others believing that she would willingly renounce such practices. The ritual struggles surrounding Hadimba and her devotees have wider implications for local identity and self-presentation with the sacrificial ground becoming an arena where locals present, debate, and reconstruct their identity. The way they perceive and interpret the sacrifice, as well as their level of participation in it, shapes their sense of belonging within the larger Hindu fold. These struggles over identity and belonging occur within the broader context of a clash between local worldviews and external ideals, cosmologies, and practices. Overall, this chapter provides a thought-provoking analysis of the various tensions between vegetarian and bloody sacrifices in the region of Kullu, while highlighting the complexities and multifaceted nature of the conflicts involving theological, moral, practical, and socio-political dimensions. The author effectively

demonstrates how the sacrificial arena becomes a site for negotiation and the reconstruction of local identity in the face of external influences and challenges to traditional practices.



Image 12.3: Hadimba's Palanquin carried on Devotees' Shoulders during Village Festival. Image Source: Ehud Halperin

The sixth chapter, *Confronting the Global*, discusses the perplexity and challenges faced by the devotees of Hadimba, framed by the changing socio-economic and environmental context. The author chronicles the transformations occurring in the region due to the shifts in market economy, tourism, and climate change that have brought both prosperity and hardships to the villagers, leading to feelings of alienation, competition, and moral decline. The followers of Hadimba continue to approach the ecological crisis from a traditional holistic perspective, according to which they interpret weather disturbances as a consequence of impropriety and declining values, and engaging in ritual action to restore balance and seek the goddess's intervention. If the ritual does not produce the desired outcome, this reinforces their opinion about the importance of human participation in maintaining the local ecosystem while endorsing a holistic worldview. The failure of traditional rituals to effectively address the broader climatic issues prompts devotees to question the validity of their worldview and they therefore feel compelled then to consider alternative ideologies that may offer better

explanations for the changes they are experiencing. Thus, the devotees engage in joint rituals to contemplate the nature of reality, the strength of their relationships, and their prospects for survival amidst the metaphorical and real storms they face. Throughout this process, Hadimba is portrayed as a complex agent who reflects the collective cognition of her community.

The rituals and sacrifices offered to the goddess demonstrate the followers' commitment to their all-inclusive worldview. However, during these rituals, various speculations about current conditions also emerge, ranging from attributing misbehaviour to divine desertion that threatens the collapse of the entire system. The notion of 'science' is viewed over here with scepticism, often associated with global warming and seen as a determinate and godless force that is beyond human influence. The author speculates on the uncertain fate of traditional holistic logic in the face of competing paradigms, wondering whether it will prevail, transform, or disappear over time. A growing sense of diminishing human agency and fatalistic worldviews may hinder the willingness of Hadimba's devotees to confront climate and environmental changes in their regions and this chapter provides a nuanced exploration of the challenges faced by Hadimba's devotees that highlight tensions between traditional beliefs and emerging paradigms, and the impact of these changes on individual and collective agency.

Overall, *The Many Faces of a Himalayan Goddess* provides a fascinating insight into the cult of Hadimba, highlighting the complex agency of the deities and the active participation of the community and the enduring power of its goddess traditions. Furthermore, the author explores the challenges and transformations of Hadimba as not only a deity but also a 'way of being' for her devotees, and how she serves as an index, platform, and agent within her community. The author discusses how Hadimba and her devotees engage in debates and negotiations concerning various cultural issues, reflecting on their conflicting interests and opinions, portraying Hadimba as both a conserving and changing agent, who upholds tradition simultaneously while she embraces progress. She is depicted as occupying multiple positions, from the local to the pan-Indian that reflects the influence of internal and external forces on the community. Through his study, the author demonstrates the unique ways in which modernity and capitalism are integrated into rural (non-urban) India, with Hadimba serving as an example of how traditional values and new realities coexist and interact. These broader insights emphasize the understanding of village deities as dynamic and ever-changing platforms for reflection, negotiation, and action. The book discusses the ongoing processes of shaping and reshaping Hinduism, suggesting that Hinduism is continually being invented and reconfigured. The author's style of writing is clear and engaging, allowing the reader to visualize events and immerse themselves within the narrative.

Halperin effectively weaves together personal observations, theoretical insights, and cultural information to create a cohesive and thought-provoking piece. Overall, the book offers a captivating glimpse into a specific ritual and its cultural context. It effectively conveys the author's experiences and reflections while incorporating relevant scholarly perspectives in his writing that serves as an engaging and informative piece. I strongly recommend this book for every reader of religious and

area studies (Hinduism and India/South Asia) and anthropology students of under and post graduate levels as well as for all researchers and academic enthusiasts.

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