

## The “Descent of the Pandavas”: Ritual and Cosmology of the Jads of Garhwal

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The Jads exist, as they say, at the “borders”, by which they mean, spatially at the borders of India and Tibet (now under Chinese occupation) in District Uttarkashi in the North Indian state of Uttaranchal, and culturally at the borders of Buddhist Tibet and Hindu India.<sup>1</sup> The Jads are not legally recognized as having a separate identity, and in official records as well as in much popular discourse they are simply called “Bhotiya”. The Bhotiyas are one of the major groups of the Central Himalayan region, along with Hindu Paharis (Berreman 1983), and the nomadic, Muslim buffalo-herders called Gujjars about whom little ethnographic or historical research has been done. In fact, there are numerous so-called Bhotiya groups inhabiting the high river valleys in this region, most or all of whom reject the generic label “Bhotiya”, which they associate with Tibetan ethnicity and the Buddhist religion, and preferring to be called by their specific names, which they feel more clearly reflect their Indian, Hindu identity. In the Almora and Pithoragarh Districts bordering Nepal, four groups corresponding to the four valleys are found: the Johari, the Byansi, the Chaudansi and the Darmi. The generic name Shauka is used for the Bhotiyas of Pithoragarh and Almora (Nawa 2000). In Chamoli District the Marccha inhabit the Mana valley, while the Tolcha occupy the Niti valley except for Bampa, Gamsali and Niti villages which are inhabited by the Marpha. Although most works refer to these Bhotiya groups as endogamous (Sastry 1995: 134, Srivastava 1966), my fieldwork shows sustained inter-marriage between the Jads of Uttarkashi and residents of Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh and Chamoli District in Uttaranchal. The Kinnauris of Himachal had historical links with Tibet and were historically a part of Bushahr state (Khosa 1992, Raha and Mahato 1985), and the Jads still refer to them as Bushahri. The Kinnauri Rajputs are also known as *khas* and are quite similar to the Jads with whom they intermarry.

While most of the other Bhotiyas were subject during the colonial period to the dual authority of both the British government and of Ngari in Western

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Tibet (Brown 1994: 235), the area in which the Jads reside never came under direct British rule. Therefore in the past the Jads regarded themselves as subjects of the Raja of Tehri. They traded with the people of Western Tibet, who were little influenced by Lhasa. They have often been falsely identified as Buddhists, largely because of their physical features and their economic and cultural links with Tibetans. The myth that they are Buddhists is strengthened by the presence of Buddhist monasteries in their villages built by H.H. the Dalai Lama in 1965. Buddhist monks from nearby centres such as Dehra Dun visit the villages for short periods and perform rituals of a mostly magical nature, such as warding off the evil eye and also birth and death rituals. The Jads celebrate the Buddhist New Year Losar and hang prayer flags atop their houses, but at the same time they profess faith in many Hindu deities and rituals, and insist that they are ethnically distinct from Tibetans. However, like most mountain dwellers of this region they have little knowledge of any textual religion, Buddhist or Hindu, and live by their own categories of the supernatural (Krengel 1997: 201). They lived under the shadow of two literate civilizations, but as a pastoral group situated on the margins of both, they were never really converted to any mainstream religion or to strongly hierarchic social values. As a border people, they are influenced by the political and economic relationships between the countries on whose borders they exist. Before certain transformations took place in their lives that brought them into close contact with mainstream cultures, they practiced and believed not in any prophetic or textual religion but rather in a cosmology that is a product of the historical and ecological dimensions of their existence.

The Bhotiyas incorporate elements of both Hindu and Buddhist religions, a phenomenon common in the Himalayan region (Macfarlane 1981: 127; Kar 1986: 81). Gellner has pointed out that this type of religious eclecticism is a common feature in South Asia (2001: 70). Exposure to the two universal religions of Hinduism and Buddhism has come into Bhotiyas' lives in the form of trading partners, neighbours, pilgrims, and by the fact that they reside in one of the most sacred geographical regions of the Hindus. Their acceptance of Hindu beliefs and practices is influenced not only by cultural contact but also by their social and economic organization. The Jads practice transhumance, moving from a low altitude in winter to a high altitude in summer,<sup>2</sup> and I have found that they become far more

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<sup>2</sup> "The Upper valleys of the 'Bhote' represent an interface between two main ecological and subsistence zones; on the one hand, a zone conducive to traditional terrace agriculture – in some ways even an extension of the ecological belt of the humid flatlands of India – and on the other, a zone beyond the lofty Himadri passes in which little can grow, but which in days past produced its own brand of resources. The existence of these two zones provided the people straddling both, the Bhotiyas, with a unique opportunity: the possibility to trade in the products which each zone in turn required" (Brown 1994: 218)

Hinduized in the lower altitude village where they live in close proximity to the pilgrim centre of Uttarkashi. No doubt Jad culture contains many elements common with other Bhotiya groups, but they also have a distinct identity and belief system that is a historical derivative of their locality and environment.

### **Jad identity and beliefs**

The Jads' pastoral economy and life style plays a definitive role in shaping their beliefs, and it would not be amiss to refer to them as an "ecological ethnicity" (Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli 2000: 296). For example, they say that they do not believe in an earth mother like cultivators, but rather in the sun mother, *āmā nyāmā*. Here it would be relevant to mention that sun worship has long been associated with pastoral communities and even the ancient Aryans were sun-worshippers, a practice that dwindled with their transition to agriculture (Dwivedi 2000: 9).

In emphasizing that they are sun-worshippers, the Jads are comparing themselves in a general way with cultivators in order to distinguish themselves from them. The local Garhwalis believe in cults of the *khetrapāl*, *bhūmyāl* and other earth related deities, and practice a ritual called *bhūmihār pūjan* to ensure good crops, but their belief in the earth as sacred is somewhat less marked than in the plains. In Northern India people reverentially touch the earth in a gesture of *praṇām* (salutation) as they get up in the morning, asking forgiveness for having to put their feet on its breast. She is worshipped as Prithvi (earth) and is recognized for her qualities of patience and sacrifice (Moor 1999: 292). The Jads associate the sun with their survival as they believe that she causes the snow to melt and clouds to form, which brings rain that in turn forms the snow that makes the rich pastures of the higher reaches of the mountains possible. Without the sun, whose warmth is also essential for the lives of their animals, the cycle of nature would be incomplete, and so would the pastoral cycle that is the basis of their livelihood. Thus

the regenerative cycles of nature are the collective actions of the beings that make up the non-human world and ecological ethnicities do not place themselves in a dimension radically separate from these (Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli 2000: 302).

The Jads' identity is closely associated with the village deity Meparang, who stands at the entrance of their high altitude village of Bhagori near Harsil, a tiny town about five miles from the better-known pilgrimage centre of Gangotri. The symbolic significance of Meparang is immense for the Jads,

who are not a self-reproducing group, since their marriage relations extend beyond their own community. Meparang alone is seen as common to all Jads, who are otherwise quite fragmented in their beliefs in various supernatural beings. This fragmentation is because they come from different groups (although most belong to one of the various Bhotiya communities), from various places in the mountains and are integrated into the village through marriage. Thus a person may have a divinity that belongs to his/her native village or to the native village of their parents or even grandparents. But since these in-marrying groups are fundamentally similar in being pastoral mountain dwellers, dwelling in similar habitats, belonging to the same cultural region and sharing a common geographical and historical background, many of the Jads' beliefs are quite similar to those that have been documented by other scholars working in this region (Sax 2002, Mazumdar 1998). In the rest of this paper when I refer to the Jads, it is with this understanding of an internal differentiation held together by overarching similarities of shared beliefs and practices engendered by the pastoral economy, mountain habitat and *pahāḍī* culture, and situated in a life lived in the same villages and sharing the same pastures (Channa 1998). The communities with whom the Jads have sustained relations of kinship are the upper Kinnauris, sometimes also referred to as Jads, as well as the Tolcha and Marccha from Niti and Mana valleys. With these people they also share pastures in the lower altitudes. Marriages may also take place with Garhwali Rajputs, Nepalis, and occasionally with other communities, however there are sustained kin relations only with those with whom the Jads share pastures and who are recognized as part of the larger kindred group, although no specific term is used for them. Those born in the Jad village always have a sense of superiority with regard to those coming from outside, and joking terms like *kunnubā* and *nitāli* are often used to refer to them. Internally the Jads are divided into the Chiang or high caste which lays claim to *kṣatriya* (Rajput) status, and the Phiba who are considered untouchable. Numerically the Chiang form three-fourths of the population. Similar divisions are found among all the groups with whom they marry and the divisions are strictly maintained for purposes of marriage. In the rest of the paper when I talk of the Rajput identity of the Jads it is only with reference to the Chiang. Since the *pāṇḍav līlā* discussed below is performed only by the *kṣatriyas*, the Phiba join in only as spectators. The Phiba, however, share all beliefs including having their own *kuldevtās*.

The Jads have their own pantheon of supernatural beings that may either be in the form of *glāh* (gods) or natural objects like trees, streams etc. While some gods are viewed as an inherent part of the environment, others are seen as having arrived in their village as guests and then stayed on. This includes gods on pilgrimage to the sacred Hindu centre at Gangotri, who opted to stay in Bhagori, "because they liked the immense beauty and purity of the environment". The gods also enter the village as *kuldevtā* of the in-

marrying *magpa*<sup>3</sup> husbands who marry local women and settle down to become Jads. The *kuldevtā* of the lineage of in-marrying men become a part of the village. The Pandava brothers and their common wife Draupadi are also said to be the *kuldevtās* of men who married into the Jads, who have now attained the status of village deities.

This aspect of inclusion must be understood against the backdrop of the Jad world-view. Incorporation by marriage is to the Jads a legitimate enterprise, a means through which they have reproduced their identity over the generations. Both humans and gods are incorporated into Jad society through marriage. Thus men marry in from kindred Bhotiya groups and in so doing they bring in their *kuldevtās* to become a part of the Jad world. This is also the reason why any supernatural incorporation is always as a *kuldevtā*, just like any human incorporation has to be as a spouse.<sup>4</sup> In-marrying women also retain their social attachment to their *mait* (natal village) and clan deities. This is often manifested in the woman becoming a medium for the descent of a deity that belongs to her own “place” and in future assuring that the deity is incorporated into the local pantheon, at least marginally. Some of these deities, however, play no important role in village affairs.

### **The Pandava-Lila and Jad identity**

The Central and Western Himalayas are associated with worship of the five Pandava brothers, protagonists of India’s great epic *Mahābhārata*. Sax (1995: 131) writes that *pāṇḍav līlā* is found only in the Garhwal region and not in other parts of the sub-Himalayan foot hills, but I have been told by students doing fieldwork in the contiguous region of Himachal Pradesh that such performances are also found there. As already mentioned, the

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<sup>3</sup> The term *magpa* and the institution are both Tibetan in origin. Amongst Tibetans on the border of Uttaranchal, a couple with daughters but no son marry their daughter to a man who stays on with them and inherits their property. Among the Hindus, a similar institution is called *ghar javāīm* and is relatively uncommon. Amongst the Jads, however, it is more common and the *magpa* son-in-law performs the death rituals of his wife’s parents as well as inherits their property. Among the Hindus such an act would be unthinkable since, theoretically, only an agnatically-related male – preferably the son – can perform the death ritual. (There are, however, ritual and other techniques for getting round this problem.) Amongst the Jads I found that women often maintained full control over their father’s property, in spite of the formal recognition of the husband as owner, relegating the *magpa* husband to an often-humiliating marginal position within the household.

<sup>4</sup> Women also enter the village regularly as brides, as the Jads are both virilocal and patrilineal. The status of women born in the village however varies significantly from women who enter it as brides, a fact that I have discussed elsewhere.

Pandavas are considered as the *kuldevtās* or lineage deities of many households in the village.

In this part of the Himalayas, the performance of the *pāṇḍav līlā* is linked to a *kṣatriya* (high caste) identity and for the Jads it may be an effort to identify with a larger *kṣatriya* and caste Hindu identity. But such claims are limited to the local context and not necessarily valid outside of it, since plains Hindus tend to look down on *pahāḍī* Hindus in any case. I believe that the performance of the *pāṇḍav līlā* reflects power relations between the Hindus of the plains and those of the mountains, an issue that also lies behind some major political movements in this area, including the movement for statehood. Thus the Jads can aspire only to local acceptance as a high Hindu caste but not to wider acceptance in India, even when they perform the *pānoh* or Pandava ritual.

Most plains Hindus explain the hill people's worship of the Pandavas by the myth that the Pandavas lived in this region during the exile period, the most obvious illustration of such influence being the prevalence of polyandry among certain local tribal populations, although not among the caste Hindus. But those communities among whom polyandry is found, such as the Khasas, Jaunsaris and Kinnauris, call themselves *kṣatriya*. Since the Pandavas were *kṣatriyas*, such self-identification lays claim to a form of kinship with the Pandavas and it is implied that these polyandrous tribal communities were in fact in some ways descendants of the Pandavas, a claim not acceptable to high-caste Hindus elsewhere. The indigenous Rajputs or *khasa* also claim descent from the Pandavas but they, too, have been seen as inferior to those local Rajputs who claim descent from immigrants (Sax 1995: 138).

The Jads are recognized as Rajputs in only a limited manner and certainly not by the mainstream Hindus, the pilgrims and the urban populations of Uttarkashi. Thus we have actually four kinds of *kṣatriyas*: those who come directly from the plains, those claiming descent from earlier immigrants, indigenous *khasa* Hindus, and finally the tribes claiming to be *kṣatriya*, like the Jads and the Kinnauris. The dynamics of identity formation is towards striving for a higher status for larger political gains. However the search is not only for a higher identity within the Hindu system but also a claim to equality with others within India's modern political democracy.

The period of my fieldwork coincided with the height of the Uttarakhand movement for statehood, which involved the unification of the hill people as opposed to those from the plains. At this point in time, there seemed a greater willingness on the part of the *pahāḍīs* to accept the Jads' claims for *kṣatriya* status. The fracturing of identity between the plains and the mountains was reaching a climax, nurtured by the feelings of resentment by even the high caste *pahāḍīs*, of the contempt exhibited towards them by the

plains Hindus. The evolution of Jad identity can thus be understood with reference to the changing political climate. This was thus an appropriate time for the Jads to push for their Hindu identity, and their version of the *pāṇḍav līlā*, the *pānoh*, is one of the means they adopted to do so.

To understand the performance of the *pāṇḍav līlā* by the Jads, we have to understand performance itself in a theoretical perspective that prioritizes the aspect of identity formation and creation of “self” and its relationship to others (Sax 1995: 133, 2002: 5). Sax is emphatic that rituals do not only reflect cultural conditions, but also change them. This would be particularly true of a group such as the Jads, who are in the process of both creating new concepts of self as well as using them as a political vehicle to push for a wider acceptability in Hindu society.

It is also important here to mention another phenomenon, that of the recognition or rather the promotion of the Pandavas from family deities to village deities. Such a transition is itself a political act (cf. Galey 1994: 199). At some point of time the Jads began enacting the *pāṇḍav līlā* whereby the Pandavas became deities recognized by the entire village.<sup>5</sup> The entire village joins the enactment, although only those persons with Pandavas as *kuldevtās* can be mediums, and only such households can cook and host the feast during *pānoh* (descent of Pandava). But the power of the Pandavas lies in the recognition and participation of the entire village in the enactment. This power is significant, since a large number of households claim the Pandava as their *kuldevtās*. This could be a consequence of the political process of Hinduization, whereby kinship with the Pandavas would be claimed by many.

The enactment of the *pāṇḍav līlā* by the Jads is a comparatively recent phenomenon and is an outcome of a shift in their identity as well as in their relationship to mainstream Hindu populations. By the seventies definite changes had begun in the identity of the Jads because of the loss of contact and trade with the Tibetan populations across the border, the presence of the Indian army in their environment as a result of the 1962 border war with China, and the strengthening of communication with the Indian mainland via roads and telecommunication. There has occurred a perceptible shift in their identity, from *Rongpa* (literally ‘down there’, a term that was formerly used by their Tibetan trade partners for them), to Hindu *kṣatriya*.

The social and political integration with the Hindus of the plains is also because of a physical shift and integration into the Indian democracy through affirmative action taken by the government of India in giving them various benefits as members of a “Scheduled Tribe”. Jad youth (below thirty) are enrolled in schools and colleges (some in professional medical

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<sup>5</sup> The earliest evidence is on the basis of eye-witness accounts of fieldworkers who visited this area in the early seventies.

and engineering schools) and are far more urban than the previous generation. They have changed their names to Garhwali Rajput clan names like Negi, Rawat and Bhandari. First names are also changed to more “modern” ones like Sanjit, Ranjita and Simran (often copied from Hindi movies). Men and women have started wearing clothing similar to urban North Indian women (*salwār kamīz* and trousers). Every child, boy or girl, goes to school and is literate at the present time.

This shift in identity becomes even more pronounced when they move down to their winter village, Dunda near Uttarkashi, a fairly urban pilgrim town. Here they adopt the ways of the local people with whom they have closer interaction. The marriages and rituals celebrated here are far more Hinduized than in the higher summer village at Bhagori. The people say, “in Bhagori we are ‘ourselves’. This is where we belong”. In Uttarkashi, they undergo a seasonal shift in identity, becoming more urban and Hindu.

The Hindu identity is, however, only superficial, for deep down they remain Jads, a pastoral people whose social life is reflected in their pantheon of supernatural beings. Their celebration of *pāṇḍav līlā* or *pānoh* amply demonstrates this tension between their Hindu and their primal identities. They accept the Pandavas as part of Hindu Rajput Garhwali tradition, and they perform the *pāṇḍav līlā*. But the beliefs surrounding the performance, as well as the enactment itself, reflect the paradox of identity faced by the contemporary Jads. On the one hand, they remain true to their traditional pastoral sentiments and world-view. On the other, they pay lip-service to being Hindus and Rajputs in order to find greater acceptance in larger Indian society with whom they have forged new political and economic relationships. They are engaged in active trade with plains people, with whom they need to mingle when they go for studies and jobs to the cities and attempt to find their place in the Indian democracy.

### **The Pandavas: Jad myths and beliefs**

The Pandavas are known in this region because they are believed to have ascended to heaven by this route, the mountains beyond Gomukh near Gangotri being regarded as the mythical Mount Kailasha, the abode of the great Hindu god Shiva. The Jads believe that somewhere on their way to heaven, the Pandavas actually stayed back and are now forever a part of their sacred landscape. The myth of *pānoh* mixes the Sanskrit version of *Mahābhārata* and its local interpretation in the pastoral world-view of the Jads. It centers on the third Pandava brother Bhim, known for his superhuman strength. In her work on the village of Purnath in Garhwal, Mazumdar (1998: 136) has also observed that Bhim is always the most eulogized out of the five brothers. The myth that is enacted is the marriage of Bhim to a forest dwelling woman, Hidimba, whose children are pastoralists. The identity with Hidimba as a hill woman and her children is

stressed, and little attempt is made to trace descent directly from the Pandavas, as do other *kṣatriyas* in the hills. Thus the Jads identify as affines of the Pandavas by asserting the latter's incorporation into the Jad community through marriage rather than by descent, a pattern that is perfectly compatible with the Jad social mechanism of incorporation by marriage described above, and also with the fact that the Pandavas are viewed as *kuldevtās*, the category of supernatural legitimately assimilated by marriage. In any marriage among the Jads that involves a *magpa* husband, the children of the union are considered as fully Jad. In this case also, the progeny of Hidimba<sup>6</sup> (a local *pahāḍī* woman) and Bhim (a *magpa* husband) are Jads. The meaning and interpretation of *pāṇḍav līlā* for the Jads is definitely different from that of the *pahāḍī* Hindus.<sup>7</sup> Sax has identified the five major performative elements of a *pāṇḍav līlā* as drumming, dance, weapons, re-citation, and feasting and hospitality (2002: 53-54). In the Jads' performance, at least two of these are missing: the weapons and the recitation. Interestingly these two aspects are the most Hinduized as compared with the other elements. In standard *pahāḍī* performances, weapons are carefully-guarded sacred relics which act as important symbols of identity. In fact, as Sax points out, a person assumes the divine identity only when he or she dances with the sacred weapons. Secondly, the role of the bard is essential in linking the ritual to the local oral traditions. In fact the recitation of the bard often takes on the form of a contest in which they challenge each other on the accuracy of their knowledge of the mythology.<sup>8</sup> The Jads' performance on the other hand is done with cheap, toy-like imitation weapons made of cardboard and tinsel that are not seen as having any significance except to identify a particular costume. Although the performance is expressive of changing identity such that the identity of *kṣatriya* commingles with the pastoral identity of the Jads, it is also true that their system of meaning is significantly different from mainstream Hinduism.

The entire performance is a dance pantomime, accompanied by drumming, gestures and certain paralinguistic exclamations; however, no words are spoken or recited. A simple reason for this may be that the Jads do not have strong oral traditions like Hindus. They are historically

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<sup>6</sup> Hidimba is also an established goddess in some nearby Himalayan regions, for example in the Kullu valley.

<sup>7</sup> For example, an interesting dance performed by the Garhwali Hindus is the dance of Nakula, which is mentioned by Sax as "among the most popular dances of *pāṇḍav līlā*" (Sax 2002: 63) depicting the daily routine of a farmer. Not only does the Jad *pāṇḍav līlā* have no such depiction, the characters of Nakula and Sahdev are weak and have a very marginal position in the enactment. Nakula embodies the sentiments of an agricultural community totally missing among the Jads.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, Sax believes that in demonstrating their bardic knowledge, Garhwal Rajputs lay claim to quasi-Brahmanical status (2002: 121).

recognized as the speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language while Hindi, by means of which they access the *Mahābhārata*, has most likely been adopted by them at a later time. The lack of any elaborate rendering of the *Mahābhārata* as depicted in the accounts by Sax, most likely has to do with both these factors: a relatively weak oral tradition and a relatively late adoption of the Hindi language. I could not, however, confirm these hypotheses for the simple reason that no description of older Jad rituals exist and the people themselves were extremely reluctant to put any kind of date or time on their performance. For them, it has been going on since the time of the Pandavas. However, a few old people, including my very good friend Kaushalya, hinted that the number of local gods has considerably increased since the Jads shifted from Nelang to the lower altitude village at Bhagori.

The five Pandavas and their co-wife Draupadi are treated as a single unit, and worshiped accordingly. The god Krishna, who for Hindus elsewhere is the key figure of the *Mahābhārata*, is totally ignored. In fact the Jads show almost total ignorance of Krishna and the only way they celebrate Janamashtami, the birthday of Krishna, is by taking their village deity Meparang for a bath to the river Ganga at Gangotri. This is in tune with the similar performances by other *pahāḍī* Hindu villages where the village deity is taken for a similar bath on Janamashtami (e.g. Mazumdar 1998: 209).

The performance is not considered by the Jads to be a play or a *līlā*, and in fact this particular Hindu concept is absent in their vocabulary. Instead, they refer to it as *pāṇḍav uttarnā* or the ‘descent of the Pandavas’. The main enactment takes the form of a possession ritual in which the Pandavas descend into the body of their human mediums, who become for all practical purposes these gods. The Jads view the descent of deities differently from other kinds of possession. It is for example distinguished from *pakaḍnā* (catching) or *caḍhnā* (ascending), the grabbing of a body or its invasion by a bad or unwanted spirit. In other words, for a lesser being like an evil spirit or ghost, illegal invasion is an ascent into a higher being, the human. In case of a divinity, however, it is a descent from higher realms into a lower, human body.

The story upon which this ritual is based is the story of the *gaiṇḍā* or rhinoceros that is killed by the Pandavas. A comparison must be made with the “hunting of the rhinoceros” documented by Sax (2002: 64-92), as an important episode in *pāṇḍav līlā* in Garhwal. However, the Jads’ version of this story varies significantly from the one narrated by Sax, in that the rhinoceros is not linked to the performance of a death ritual for Pandu, nor to the *śamī* tree. The Jads do not interpret this story as exemplifying the bravery of the Pandavas, but rather their cruelty, their “going out of control”. The second part of the enactment therefore takes the form of a “cooling” or pacification (*śānt karnā*) of the “enraged” Pandavas.

In the more common version of *Mahābhārata*, the Pandavas undergo a period of exile in which they roam the jungles as commoners. During this time Bhim is supposed to have married a demoness named Hidimba. After his marriage to her he moves on together with his brothers, for they are forbidden to remain in one place. In the original myth, Hidimba gives birth to a son named Ghatotkach, who grows up strong and brave like his father and towards the end of the epic, during the Great War, comes to assist his father and dies a hero's death.

In the myth of *pānoh*, however, Bhim has two children, Babika and Babiki, by his demon wife.<sup>9</sup> These children, one boy and one girl, were grazing their *gainḍā* (rhinoceros) in the forest. The Pandavas come across these animals and do not know that they belong to the children of Bhim. They want to kill them but the children intervene, saying "Do not kill them, do not kill them!" However the Pandavas insist upon killing them, as they are in a mood for hunting. Here it must be mentioned that hunting as sport is seen primarily as a *kṣatriya* prerogative. Hunting as sport is distinguished from hunting as a livelihood, the latter being relegated to the low castes and tribals. For the pastoral children of Hidimba this blood sport is abhorrent. In the hunt, it is Arjun who first hits the animal with his arrow, then Bhim strikes it with his *gadā* (mace), and finally all of them fall upon the animals and kill them. All this time Babika and Babiki keep protesting and finally when the animals are killed they weep bitterly. During the ritual, the persons who play Babika and Babiki shed real tears, and the audience sympathizes, many onlookers even weeping along with them. Later, Bhim comes to know that they are his own children and he is very repentant and feels sorry to have killed the animals.

The myth indicates some interesting sentiments of a pastoral people. Firstly, in a pastoral community grazing animals in the forest is a commonplace activity that one would expect children to perform. The animal chosen is a rhinoceros, for demon children would not be grazing a small animal like a sheep and it is also an interesting assimilation of a similar and popular myth of this region. While enactment of the myth elsewhere emphasizes the strength and bravery of the Pandavas, the Jads emphasize the weeping of the children and the repentance of the killers. We see the pastoral peoples' cultural abhorrence of shedding the blood of animals unnecessarily. Most importantly, the story indicates that the Jads identify with the pastoral children Babika and Babiki, and not with the warlike Pandavas. In his analysis of the Pahari version of this story and its accompanying ritual, Sax (2002: 64) emphasizes the motif of the separation of father and son and their subsequent confrontation, both in Oedipal terms

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<sup>9</sup> Sax (2002: 101) refers to Bhim's son Babrik in one version. Also, in some versions two children, one boy and one girl, instead of only one boy, are mentioned (ibid.: 89).

as well as in terms of local social organization. With reference to the Jads, one might note that for a pastoral people, the absence of the father for a long period of time is an actual social reality.

### **The ritual**

*Pānoh* occurs during the Jad *Navrātrī* (festival of nine nights) in the month of *Asur* (Hindi *asāḍh*), which normally falls in September, just before the Jads descend to their lower altitude village at Dunda. The spatial location is in the high altitude village, for according to the Jads the gods are found only on the higher reaches which are *sangma* or pure. The major festival celebrated by them in their lower altitude village at Dunda is Losar, the Tibetan New Year that is performed by the household head and does not involve any gods or possession rituals. For the first five days there is much feasting, drinking and dancing. The main purpose of these five days is to instil “life” into the two large pumpkins selected to represent the *gainḍā* or rhinoceros. Two large, clean pumpkins are selected from the fields. One should be round to represent a female (*mon*) and the other should be long to represent a male (*phoh*). These are then decorated to look like animals. Small wooden legs are inserted to make them stand, and eyes are carved out. The pumpkins are decorated with flowers and garlands, and kept in the clearing in the centre of the village where the *pānoh* will take place. The first five days’ festivities consist of eating, drinking, dancing and drumming to “awaken” the animals. It is important to note that full five days are spent on bringing to life the “animals”, thereby indicating the centrality of animals in this pastoral ritual. Later they light bonfires and dance all night. They say that “the eyes of the pumpkins shine like that of real animals at night”, and on *ṣaṣṭhī*, the sixth day of Navratri, the Pandava descend on to their mediums. The Pandava then dance around the now “living” animals and try to kill them. On the eighth day (*aṣṭamī*), they finally succeed. First Arjun hits a rhinoceros with his arrow, then Bhim hits it with his mace, and then everyone falls on them and they are cut up into small pieces, after which people dance around with the pieces. All this time Babika and Babiki shed copious tears. After the pumpkins are “killed”, a goat is sacrificed; it is symbolic of the main enemy of the Pandavas, their half-brother Duryodhana. When the goat is sacrificed, the Pandavas hold a blanket around it to form a kind of tent and hold their weapons over it. The goat is killed by a person of low caste, either Jhumariya or Koli. It is sacrificed by slitting its throat, and the Jads shuddered at the thought of it, saying, “Our men do not have the stomach to slit the throat of a live animal. They never do it. We call a person of low caste to do this abhorrent task.” After the goat is killed, a peculiar performance takes place. The woman who embodies Draupadi goes into the temporary tent and later emerges with her lips smeared in blood. She has “drunk the blood” of the goat representing

Duryodhana.<sup>10</sup> This again is a sign that the woman is truly “possessed”, for in Jad world-view women and blood are totally opposed. According to their values, a woman is not associated with any act of bloodshed. The sight of a woman with blood-smearred lips creates a situation of great awe and most people feel that the goddess Draupadi has actually descended. Here again there is a divergence from the popular Hindu version where Draupadi is said to have kept her hair open after being publicly insulted by Duhshasana, the brother of Duryodhana, vowing that she would braid her hair again only with his blood. In the epic war, Bhim kills Duhshasana and takes his blood to Draupadi who braids her hair with it. When asked, my informants said that they were aware of the differences in their version and the written text. Many said that they knew the written version was different, but said that this was the way they understood it, and how they had always done things.

After the goat is killed, the Pandavas go into frenzy and dance around quite violently, and it is felt that it is time for them to be “cooled”. Some men who have the Pandavas as their *kuldevtās* form a deer in order to “cool” them. The tallest and broadest man stands in front and the next tallest behind him and so on till they form a slope like the back of a deer. A costume with the face of deer and a similar body shape is put on in such a way that the first person wears the head of the deer and the others get into the body. The Pandavas, who had been whirling around, then start jumping over the deer. At first Arjun jumps and he sits over it and becomes “cooled”, then Bhim, and then the others follow. Once they sit quietly over the deer the deities depart and their mediums become human again. Thus contact with an animal that is viewed as calm and peaceful, and also one that is never killed by the Jads, is pacifying.

Once the possession ritual is over, the person who has sacrificed the goat cuts it into pieces. He is called the *Lava*. He receives the head and the four legs. The rest of the persons who have the Pandava as their *kuldevtās* each get small pieces. These are not eaten by the participants but thrown away for the crows to eat. This probably indicates that the Jads separate themselves from the violent act of the killing of the goat (Duryodhana) and eating its flesh, which might appear to them as an act of cannibalism. The small pieces given to the crow to eat might also be viewed as symbolic of the Hindu act of *śrāddha* or death ceremony or *piṇḍa dāna*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This ritual is not specific to the Jads and has been mentioned by Sax (2002: 141) as found in some versions of the Garhwali *pāṇḍav līlā*.

<sup>11</sup> Sax has described the “hunting of the rhinoceros” as associated with the death ritual of King Pandu, but no such story or sentiment is even remotely associated with the Jad version. The throwing away of the pieces of meat can be associated with the general aversion to the goat that is not a sacrifice but a symbol of impurity as it is also killed by a low caste. The touch of the untouchable may have rendered it impure. Or it could be that it is symbolic of Duryodhana who is a negative rather

For the *pānoh*, a large amount of food is cooked. It is first given to those who had been the mediums of the various deities, but only after they have become *sānt* (calm). After all the mediums have eaten, the people belonging to the households who have cooked the food eat it and it is also distributed among all the spectators. One large vessel of food is given to the *Lava*, to be sufficient to last him and his family for a whole day.

The last two days of the *Navrātrī* are spent dancing and merry making. In this way *pānoh* can be seen as a Jad version of *pāṇḍav līlā*. However, both the part of Draupadi and her symbolic blood drinking are more like what Hildebeitel (1995) has described as Draupadi cult. Elsewhere, Mazumdar (1998: 177) mentions blood sacrifice being made to Draupadi during the *pāṇḍav nṛtya*. In many ways this part of the enactment is both aesthetically and emotionally quite contradictory to Jad values and sentiments. In its extraordinary reversal of all that stands for femininity in Jad culture, it is also the most awe-inspiring, and the point at which the ritual attains the peak of its esoteric meaning and assumes a most sacred significance.

Women and violence (bloodletting) are opposed phenomena in the Jad world-view. Women do not even break a coconut as it appears to them to be an act of violence (the coconut being a substitute for a sacrificial animal). A woman with blood on her lips is the ultimate expression of the supernatural. At this moment the enactment ceases to be mere “theatre” and becomes a *līlā* in the cosmic sense, with all its emotional intensity and its transcendental character. The mediums are seen as real gods and goddesses and the audience participates in an “atmosphere of imaginative evocation of religious moods and sentiments” (Hildebeitel 1995: 205).

There are further similarities between *pānoh* and the Draupadi cult described by Hildebeitel (1995): the converging of the entire *līlā* of Draupadi on the death of Duryodhana, and the parallel one may draw between the blood-smearred Draupadi and the goddess Kali. The death of Duryodhana is all the more remarkable, for it has nothing to do with the first part of the enactment, namely the hunting of the rhinoceros. Its incorporation into the play is only to demonstrate the divinity of Draupadi, and one may recall that Hildebeitel has made clear the affinity of Draupadi with Kali “whose ‘form’ (*Kālīrūpa*) she takes in her most violent and impure aspect” (ibid.: 207). Sax also clearly states that Draupadi is identified with Kali in the *pāṇḍav līlā* (2002: 136).

The Jads are not particularly conscious of the parallel of Draupadi with Kali, but are familiar with a non-specific form of *devī* as part of the *śakti* cult that pre-dominates the mountain areas.

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than a positive category. The goat is certainly not to be viewed as a sacrificial offering.

### The living gods

There are other, minor rituals featuring the descent of the Pandavas and other deities, including the village god Meparang, but these do not have the emotional intensity of the *pānoh*. At several such enactments that I saw, usually organized by individuals as their private divination rituals, the spectators have an attitude of watching an entertainment rather than participating in a serious ritual. This, however, does not mean that Jads regard these minor rituals as a sham; rather, it suggests that these descents are regarded as minor for the gods. Thus the gods may be in playful mood or not particularly “serious” about them. In this way a sense of true play is evoked. To the Jads, the gods are always present. On an important ritual occasion like *pānoh* and at *Navrātrī*, they participate more seriously in the on-going rituals, just as the humans do. During minor rituals the gods participate more lightheartedly and it is often only one of them who consents to actually speak or answer questions, which is the purpose of the ritual in the first place. Thus while one god, usually a goddess, actually becomes serious enough to answer the questions put to it by the person who has organized the ritual, the others pay a lighthearted visit, stay for short periods, and then go away. It is like dropping in to say “hello”. Sax describes something similar for Garhwali villages: “Along with other deities the Pandavas are invited to attend the festival, dance, and accept offerings” (1995: 135).

Thus the gods and the humans share in the same world-view and have an identical understanding of the situation. This is quite in tune with the larger world-view which does not split the human and the superhuman or divine worlds and beings. The gods are like humans: they are jealous, they get angry, they become pleased, and, most importantly, they enjoy themselves. The Jads do not know the word *līlā* but they do describe the rituals as the *khel* (play) of the gods. Some informants told me the gods entertain themselves in this way. And when the gods enjoy, can the humans be far behind? So for most Jads, the occasions of *devtā uttarnā* (divine descent) are occasions when both gods and humans eat, drink and are merry, and are liberated from the “burden of everyday existence” (Bäumer 1995: 47). This also indicates the apparent indifference of the Jads to the actual story line of the enactment, even of the *pānoh*. It does not matter what is said in the *Mahābhārata*, and most Jads know nothing about it. What is cognitively important is that certain gods exist and they play at certain times. What they play at is not relevant and is set up by tradition. Thus the answer to the question “Why this story?” is always that it is “tradition”. To the Hindu spectators, if any, such apparently non-reverential attitudes demonstrate that the Jads are “tribal”, *jaṅgalī*, and not truly cognizant of spiritual values. They do not possess the true reverence that religiosity should evoke. This in fact was the opinion of the Brahmin *paṇḍit* who came in to officiate at one marriage and who belongs to the lineage of

*paṇḍits* who officiate at the temples at Gangotri. Most caste Hindus like the teachers at the local school had similar opinions.

But the Jads' understanding is consistent with their gods. They understand them as well as they understand themselves. They need to play, make merry, have good food, and dance. They "descend" to enjoy themselves in the company of men. As Sax (1995: 137) puts it, "*pāṇḍav līlā* is fun" but the Jads believe it is fun not only for the humans but also for the gods. It is in the higher village, where the air is pure, where there is cleanliness and, most importantly, where the impact of outsiders is minimal, that one can really enjoy, be one's self and where the gods can "descend". As the Jads emphatically told me, no gods live below their high altitude village. In the plains, they become idols in temples but here in the mountains they roam at will and play at will too. It is here that they *live*.

The critical dimension of the possession ritual lies in the "descent" or appearance of gods in the human bodies. This appearance is only to enable the god to perform, and not for them to make a transition, like in the Hindu rituals of *gājan* described by Östör (1985), where it is believed that the higher gods like Shiva temporarily invade the human body. For the Jads, the gods are not making a transition from one world to another, but are always there. However they need a human body to only make this presence apparent. In this way the act of possession for the Jads, and for many other hill people, especially in relation to their ever-present and active *kuldevtā*, is different from the way other Hindus view possession. Possession is not related to any acts of merit or devotion on the part of the medium, and it accords no special social or ritual status. The medium is simply chosen by the deity for his or her "descent". This is a "subjective" or "wilful" act on the part of the divinity, and the medium is merely an object.

This explains why the Jads show no particular reverence for certain acts of possession or "descent". It is not just the appearance of the divinity that is of importance but the acts in which the divinity engages, that makes an occasion of significance. If the divinity is participating in a higher ritual occasion like *pānoh*, then the occasion calls for solemn participation on the part of every one, human and divine. On the other hand if the divinity is participating in a minor ritual, then no one need be serious about it. Humans and gods exist in the same world, the only difference is that the divine prefers to exist only in a world that is *sangma* and the humans, though they would also like to do the same, must descend to the dirty and polluted world of the lower altitudes.

## Conclusion

Let us now try to tie all the threads together. The Pandavas are a living part of the Jad community but they are not a primordial part of the Jads' environment, like Meparang and the *mātriyāl* (forest spirits); they are incorporated in the only way known to the Jads, by marriage. Thus Bhim married a woman of the forest, presumably a Jad woman, for her children graze animals. In fact, anyone who inhabits a Jad village has to be born of a Jad man or woman and is therefore a pastoralist. Since the Pandavas are neither pastoralists nor Jad, they can become part of the Jads only through marriage, and hence they are regarded as *kuldevtās*, the category of supernatural assimilated through marriage. This is also consistent with the ideology of marrying similar persons, and since both the Pandavas and the Chiang are regarded as *kṣatriyas*, there is no contradiction here. That only the Pandavas and their wife Draupadi are included in their enactment can be related to the fact that it is only the Pandavas who are *pahāḍīs*, believed to have been born in Pandukeshwar, between Joshimath and Badrinath. Thus they fulfil the basic Jad criteria of marriage within like communities, being of the mountains and also polyandrous. It is not out of context to mention that the place of their birth is not far from the villages of the Tolccha and Marccha communities with whom the Jads have marriage relationships, and that many members of the Jad village originated in this area. Thus the four concepts of incorporation, marriage, *kuldevtās* and supernatural are reflected in this myth and its enactment in ways that make sense within the Jads' cosmology. Although to outsiders, the *pānoh* may appear to be borrowed from the Hindus, its incorporation into the Jads' world is unique. This also takes us back to the beginning of this article, where I argued that the Jads' religion is uniquely Jad, although it partakes of fragments from other world-views. The *pānoh* illustrates this very well.

However, the most important dimension of the performance can only be answered when we try to answer the question "Why should the *pānoh* be performed at all?" Most eyewitness accounts before the sixties mention no such performance. The assumption of a *kṣatriya* identity by the Jads is related to the historical circumstances by which they have been pushed towards the Hindu identity.

The data on which this paper is based was gathered during fieldwork conducted in the period from 1997 to 2000. This time was one in which the Jads had already begun to adopt a mainstream Hindu identity or at least had begun to view themselves as members of a larger Indian, and predominantly Hindu, nation. Radical changes had taken place in their lives as a result of the 1962 Indo-China war, the closure of the Indo-Tibet border, the collapse of the salt trade with Tibet, and the occupation by the Indian army of their environment. Significant transformation in their lives was also brought about by their relocation to Bhagori as their only high altitude

village, whereas prior to 1962, they had two more villages, Nelang and Jadung near the Indo-Tibet frontier. Their economy, based on trans-border trade and rearing of transport animals for the mountainous region, had also been transformed so that it now focused on the trade of wool-based items such as sweaters and carpets and the selling of sheep, dogs, and minor forest produce. The trade partners, who prior to 1962 had been Tibetan, have become Hindu shopkeepers and traders from the plains of India, both Garhwali and non-Garhwali. Not only the Jads but their entire environment has transformed over the years.

The Jads have also recently begun to insist upon their Rajput identity, and this is linked to their efforts towards assimilation into the mainstream Hindu population. This effort is actually part of the larger effort by all hill people to find an identity and status equal to that of the Hindu mainstream populations of the plains who continue to resist such claims. The plains Hindus, including local government officials in Uttarkashi, schoolteachers in Bhagori, and army personnel, regard the Jads as either Tibetans or as “Bhotiya” tribals who are either Buddhists or have a tribal religion. An earlier Census of Uttarkashi district (Rizvi 1979) even calls them Buddhists, and has greatly helped to consolidate the myth that the Jads are Buddhist. This fiction is further supported by the presence of Buddhist monasteries in both their villages at Bhagori as well as at Uttarkashi. The Garhwali Hindus who live in the close vicinity of the Jads, and who have close social interaction with them, are ready to concede high caste Rajput status to them, awed by their comparative affluence and light skin, which is regarded as a mark of beauty. This recognition by the Garhwalis is also to be evaluated in terms of an overarching *pahāḍī* identity that is evolving in the hills. Thus the efforts of the Jads towards a Rajput identity are part of the construction of a *pahāḍī* as against a *deśī* identity that has been encouraged by the creation of the separate hill state of Uttaranchal. The conceding of high Rajput status to them by the local population may also be seen as a political statement of an empathy between all who live in the hills. In the same way, the reluctance of the plains people to accept this identity is integral to the larger fracturing of relations between the hills and the plains.

In retrospect we can find three levels at which the *pānoh* plays a role in relocating identities, namely the level of the village, the level of the state, and the level of the Indian mainstream. At the level of the village, the establishment of the Pandavas as village deities gives leverage to those households, numerically predominant, who claim the Pandava as their *kuldevtās*. At the state level, the enactment supports their claim to be *khas* Rajputs, and at the national level, it reaffirms their Hindu identity and also their efforts to merge with the mainstream population. The last claim is, however, still rather shaky.

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