

## **Making Faces: Self and image creation in a Himalayan valley**

by Alka Hingorani, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013, 160 pp., 134 illus., 128 in colour, ISBN 978-0-8248-3525-5, Price \$45.00

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In the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh (North India), worshippers place *mohras* (metal face-images) and *chhatris* (gold or silver parasols) on *rathas* (carriages), and consider these the material manifestation of divinity. In this relatively short book, Alka Hingorani documents and theorises the artistic creation, meaning and cultural value of these religious objects. Hingorani gives special attention to the unique place occupied by the artisan in the production process, which, she argues, assigns him the role of a cultural critic in this remote Himalayan region.

A welcome contribution to a growing body of work produced in recent years on the Western Himalaya and on the less studied Kullu district, the book's main strength is its detailed account of the artistic features and production process of the *mohras* and *chhatris*, and the high-quality illustrative photos that accompany it throughout (the author's advanced degree in photography is well attested in this volume.) Hingorani also provides useful, if somewhat repetitious, theoretical observations on the performative aspects of the ritual production process; the local characteristics, significance and meaning of religious art; the expressive qualities of the sacred objects (which she likens to material speech acts); and the potentially socially destabilising aspects of the encounter between artist, patrons and audience. The main weakness of this study is the limited ethnographic data that is provided to support these theoretical claims, which leaves the reader wanting more detailed illustrations of how things actually unfold on the ground.

Chapter One opens with a brief background on the topography, history and customs of the Kullu district, followed by an account of a recent conflict that has emerged between two local deities concerning the places occupied by their carriages in the annual Dasher festival. This case study, which effectively illustrates how important the material aspects of religious practice are in this region, provides an excellent entry point to the

whole book. Hingorani then presents the main themes of her study: the manufacturing of *mohras* and *chhatris*; the way in which the 'population that commissions the object, simultaneously a thing of material and meta-physical value, actively shapes it through discussion and dispute, criticism and defense, of both process and product' (p. 11); and the liminal, and thus socially critical, place occupied by the artisans producing these objects.

The second and third chapters ('The Object' and 'The Process', respectively) constitute, in this reader's opinion, the best part of the book. In Chapter Two, Hingorani introduces the *rathas*—the wooden carriages that, once adorned with *mohras* and other religious objects, are imbued with divinity. These *rathas* 'have become the repositories of community wealth and the *mohras*, individually, some of the most valuable objects in the material culture of the region' (p. 17). The bulk of the chapter is dedicated to presenting the typology, history and artistic analysis of *madimukhas*, the special *mohras* made of cast metal that may last centuries and are therefore considered the chief representation of the deity in the carriage. Hingorani insists that we should not merely study these *mohras* as artistic objects but should understand them within the wider cultural and social context in which they are produced and used, where they function as 'repositories of relationships and form an enduring sediment of the cognitive structures of Himalayan society' (p. 22).

It is this wider cultural context that the book's third chapter examines in detail. Unlike the *madimukhas*, most *mohras* wear out rather quickly as a result of their different metal composition, and must be melted and remoulded every two or three decades. This periodic reproduction, in which delicate innovations and artistic interpretations are introduced to old patterns in a process that involves artist, patrons and audience, renders the *mohras* both stable and shifting objects, and grants them their unique value in this remote Himalayan society. Hingorani carefully documents the technical and ritualistic aspects of two creations: a parasol for a deity named Shesh Nag, which takes several weeks, and a shorter moulding of a Shiva *madimukha*, commissioned by the author herself for the purpose of study. The text is interspersed with beautiful photos that make the process highly accessible to the reader. Alongside the detailed descriptive account, Hingorani offers several theoretical observations, suggesting, for example, that the artist's preparations echo those made by classical Indian musicians before performances (p. 38), and that the ritual

arena functions as a Foucauldian heterotopia, a real place ‘in any society where conventions are confounded... repackaged, often inverted, always contested’ (p. 42). While these suggestions are interesting, they are not always sufficiently validated by the ethnographic data. At other times the analysis itself is somewhat thin. Hingorani’s reading of the animal offerings made during the ritual, for example, is based solely on Rene Gerard’s interpretation of sacrifice (‘to protect the entire community from its own violence’, p. 43), thereby missing a world of regional meanings that accompany this popular, yet highly controversial, practice.<sup>1</sup>

In the fourth chapter (‘Speaking of Aesthetics’), drawing on ancient Indian as well as contemporary theories of aesthetics, Hingorani argues that the *mohras*, which function as both religious and aesthetic objects, acquire meaning that ‘is generated and kept alive through a process that involves the sustained participation of the community in the dialectic between idea and action, the interchange of expectation with response, which controls both change and continuity’ (p. 34). Thus, she explains, the ritual production and evaluation of *mohras* enables villagers living in relatively autonomous villages to see themselves ‘as part of a socio-cultural-economic amalgam... [that] constitutes and reconstitutes itself as a unified entity’ (p. 83). Intriguing as the theory may be, the reader is presented with only broad illustrations of how this process manifests itself on the ground. The two examples given by Hingorani—one of a short exchange between the artisan and his patrons evaluating his work, the other of a village crowd assessing the artistic quality of a new silver belt made for a deity’s *ratha*—are brief and sparse. There is not enough information about the views expressed by participants, the criticism and counter-criticism levelled, the sophistication of the evaluations offered, the elaborate aesthetic values acquired, and the complex dynamics that are supposed to be taking place in this dialectical process of aesthetic production and reproduction.

In the fifth chapter (‘The Artisan’), Hingorani makes an interesting claim concerning the unique role of the artisan as social critic. The artisan, who is itinerant by profession, is often a temporary visitor in

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1 For a recent discussion of the debate over the legitimacy of animal sacrifice in Himachal Pradesh and the way in which ‘ritual practices like goat sacrifice have become a space where Himachalis struggle to define themselves, their gods, and their histories’ (p. 210), see Elmore (2010).

other communities. His constant movement between social contexts ‘permits the initiation of an alternate discourse of society and of selfhood, [and] the possibility to transgress the commonness of an ordinary life and imbue it with the uncommon’ (p. 100). Hingorani illustrates this point by presenting several ideas and narratives put forward during the ritual production of a parasol by Taberam Soni, the chief artisan whose work she has followed in previous chapters. These illustrations—Taberam’s criticism of the caste system; his claims that low-caste musicians are close to the gods; and his reworking of a printed myth in order to elevate the status of artisans and artists—are useful but few, and make the reader wish Hingorani had presented more such materials throughout the book. Moreover, the ‘self’ that is being criticised here by Taberam seems to be based in caste alone, while other plausible elements—such as gender, financial status, political orientation, particulars of religious faith and practice, etc.—are conspicuously missing. The examples also focus on the artisan’s statements, with hardly any mention of the reception of his ideas by his audience. Again, it is regrettable that the evidence does not substantiate the theoretical claims.

In the Epilogue, Hingorani, who was unable to witness the consecration of either a *mohra* or a *chhatri*, examines instead the consecration of a new temple, which, she explains, is ‘not much different’ (p. 109). She wraps up the book by suggesting that the religious objects discussed should be seen as material speech acts made in a social and cultural language: ‘They are part of a complex signification system whose inherent polysemy is in constant friction with the fixed meaning that context often conditionally secures during active usage of the language’ (p. 110). Captivating as this observation may be, it remains unclear what the details of such material conversations are, as well as what is being said by these objects in these contexts. While the reader readily accepts that ‘an exploration of responses elicited by the work of the artisan and an assessment of the dialectics that frames such response offers the least mediated apprehension of the aesthetic aspiration of a community of people’ (p. 112), this reader wishes there were more such responses presented in the book explicitly and in detail.

To sum up, Hingorani’s book provides a useful account of the history of *mohras* and associated objects of religious art in the region, a textually detailed and visually captivating documentation of their production

process, and a plausible theorisation of how their aesthetic features are intimately associated with their sociocultural function and meaning. The book's main weakness is the imbalance between sophisticated theoretical analyses on the one hand and somewhat thin ethnographic evidence to support them on the other. There is a relative paucity of detailed ethnographic accounts of the actual exchange surrounding the production, reception and evaluation of the objects by the parties involved, especially the views expressed by the audience. The reader is also left wondering about the effects of modernity, capitalism and contemporary culture, and the reasons for the author's somewhat ahistoric approach in this regard. Nevertheless, Hingorani's work will be quite helpful for scholars interested in Himalayan and particularly Kulluvi religion, culture and art, as well as in theories of material culture and the role of art and artisans in rural societies.

### References

- Elmore, Mark 2010. 'Bloody boundaries: animal sacrifice and the labor of religion' in *Secularism and Religion Making*, edited by Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandir. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 209-25.