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Toward a history of devotional Vaishnavism in the West Himalayas: Kullu and the Ramanandis, c. 1500–1800

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*The unlikely emergence of the remote Himalayan valley of Kullu as a centre of devotional (*bhakti*) Vaishnavism c. 1650 has customarily been explained as the residual outcome of regional integration into the Mughal Empire. However, recent research on the role of ascetic movements in the history of early modern India suggests the* bairagi *sadhus behind this shift in religious orientation played a far greater role in the mountain kingdom's development than the mere 'conversion' of its raja that is reported in local tradition. This article traces the development of* bairagi *involvement in Kullu to revise the customary account of state formation in the region. It shows that Vaishnava ascetics directly contributed to Kullu's development at various historical junctures and links these processes with parallel phases of the Ramanandi* sampraday's *evolution in north India. In investigating a pan-Indian phenomenon in a limited area, this article highlights the importance of integrating regional histories within the broader framework of the history of the subcontinent.*

Keywords: Ayodhya, *bhakti*, Kullu, Pahari, Payohari, Pindori, Rajput, Ramanandis

In a recent study, William Pinch presented a long overdue revision of the role of peripatetic ascetics (sadhus) in the military, social and political development of South Asia from the early modern era to the present.[1] Having dispelled the prevailing perception of sadhus as peaceful, meditative renunciants with little interest in worldly affairs, Pinch traced their evolution from militarised sectarian brotherhoods that circulated through sacred sites in the subcontinent to formidable warlords who played a decisive part in the dramatic power struggles of late Mughal and early British India. For the Shaiva *gosain*s at the heart of his study, this process culminated in integration into the highly regulated environment of modern India, where new understandings of asceticism came to occlude the factual past in favour of today's common portrayal of ascetics as apolitical, non-combatant holy men.

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[1] Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*.

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Pinch's study also pointed to issues for future research, such as, whether all ascetic movements necessarily followed the same path in the transition to modernity; the need to account for the effects of sectarian and regional variances on the way sadhus perceived themselves and their environment(s); and the issue of internal dynamics between peripatetic and sedentary ascetics, and their impact on these movements' relations with exterior powers.

This article tackles these questions by enquiring into the role of Vaishnava *bairagi* (Skt. *vairāgyin*, lit., passionless) ascetics of the plains-based Ramanandi *sampraday* (community) in the West Himalayan kingdom of Kullu, c. 1500–1800.[2] In reading Kullu's history through the prism of devotional (*bhakti*) Vaishnavism, it offers a new perspective on north Indian political history that refines the understanding of how ascetic movements adapted to different locales; in this case, by tracing the gradual incorporation of an external group of ascetics in a mountain ('Pahari') society that is still largely considered as heterodox (or even tribal) by Hindus of the plains.[3] Widely acknowledged as the archetypical opponents of Shaiva *gosain*s, the proponents of devotional Vaishnavism managed to penetrate, gain influence and wield significant power in an environment that was far from compatible with the tenets espoused by their own movement. Although locally described as instantaneous, the *bairagi*s' establishment in Kullu was a lengthy, accommodative process that began with military service with its raja and was sustained through intermarriages and doctrinal concessions over several generations.[4]

Taking the traditional narrative of the introduction of Vaishnavism as a state religion as a starting point, the analyses that follow evaluate the development of *bairagi* involvement in Kullu against the background of early modern Pahari and Ramanandi politics. The first section summarises the account of raja Jagat Singh's 'conversion' to Vaishnavism in 1661, as penned by a local historian in 1885. A review of the central themes of the story reveals that far from being a novel phenomenon, the magic-wielding Vaishnavas that arrived in Kullu entered a region that was already saturated with similar Shakta and Shaiva ascetics who wielded considerable influence over local rulers and their subjects, and against whom they continued to compete in the years that followed. The succeeding sections enter into the details of the conversion story to explicate how several phases of Ramanandi history became condensed in a single historical narrative. In reading documentary evidence and folkloric sources in conjunction with recent research on Ramanandis, the second section proposes a trajectory for *bairagi* expansion into Kullu from its primary centre in Galta, Rajasthan (founded c. 1500), through a sub-lineage that was

[2] Although the terms '*bairagi*' and '*gosain*' are interchangeable in the West Himalayas, for the sake of clarity, this article follows the customary reading of the former as indicating ascetics of Vaishnava persuasion and the latter as Shaivas.

[3] The most obvious indication for this is human sacrifices, which were still 'within the living memory of the people' at the beginning of the twentieth century; Shastri, 'Historical Documents', p. 118.

[4] For an overview of this process in Himachal Pradesh, see Goswamy, 'Religion and Art in the Punjab Hills'.

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based in Pindori, Punjab (c. 1600–50). The third section enquires into the impact of internal divisions within the Ramanandi *sampraday* on Kullu history and their representation in the Pahari account. It suggests that (at least partly) armed *bairagi*s were already present in the valley prior to the alleged date of its raja's conversion and that their entrenchment in the kingdom is best understood in the context of regional patterns of state formation, in which warrior ascetics played a central role. The growing cleavages between peripatetic (renunciant/*tyagi*), warrior (*naga*) and sedentary (temple dwelling/*rasik*) Ramanandis during the eighteenth century and the rise of Ayodhya as an alternative centre of *sampraday* activity are similarly shown to have influenced the Kullu narrative, illustrating how the nexus of Rajput, Mughal and ascetic politics played out in West Himalayan kingdoms. In examining phenomena of pan-Indian significance in a discrete setting, this article highlights the importance of addressing local traditions for attaining a better understanding of the historical processes that link centre and periphery in South Asian history.

Vishnu Comes to Kullu: The Pahari Perspective

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the Pahari administrator Hardyal Singh wrote a series of histories of the kingdoms of the Punjab Hills that were collectively entitled *Majma Tawarikh-i-Kohistan-i-Punjab* ('History of the Punjab Hill States'; hereafter *MTK*). Hailing from a family of scribes (*quanungo*s) that had traditionally served the rajas of Kangra, Singh's knowledge of Pahari culture, history and governance secured him a privileged position under the British that lent authority to his account.[5] As part of his mandate to align 'dysfunctional' regimes with British modes of governance, Singh travelled between royal courts in different capacities—at times as a civil magistrate, at others as a representative of the Court of Wards—where he came into close contact with ruling families.[6] It was during his stay in Kullu (1875–88) that he wrote the third section of the *MTK* (completed in 1885), which is devoted to the kingdom's history and largely based on the nowadays unavailable genealogical roll (*vamshavali*) of the reigning dynasty.[7] Although replete with fairly crude attempts at Sanskritisation, the *MTK* is

[5] Although never published, copies of the manuscript circulated among administrators and historians of the region, informing much of the area's modern historiography, as evinced in the adoption of its title by John Hutchison and Jean-Philippe Vogel for their monumental *History of the Punjab Hill States* (hereafter *HPHS*) of 1933, which remains the standard work of reference for West Himalayan history to date.

[6] The British conquest of the hills north of the Sutlej River (1845–46) saw the dissolution of the kingdoms of Kangra and Kullu. The *quanungo*s of Kangra entered British service in 1861, the 11-year hiatus being the time needed for their former patrons to reconcile to the new regime. By 1883, 17 members of the family were occupying administrative positions in the hills and two in Kota, Rajasthan; see Dayal, *Twarikh Rajgan-e-Zila Kangra* (hereafter *TRZK*), pp. 64–67.

[7] For the dates of Hardyal Singh's sojourn in Kullu, see Bhatnagar, *Kullū kā Itihās*, p. 26. For criticism of the *MTK*'s uncritical reading of the *vamshavali*, see Shastri, 'Historical Documents', pp. 120–21. A British administrator who had consulted the *vamshavali* some two decades prior to

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accepted as historical truth by the greater part of the valley's inhabitants, rendering it the earliest available text of Kullu history. Its account of the establishment of Vaishnavism as a state religion by raja Jagat Singh (r. 1637–72) is thus instructive of the way locals—and local elites in particular—perceived the advent of devotional religion and its subsequent integration into the kingdom's history. Although conforming to the pattern of generic 'conversion stories', a close reading of the elements featured in the account can be used to decipher the different phases of Ramanandi involvement in Kullu through the medium of the order's ascetics. In order to address these developments, it is first necessary to summarise the narrative of the raja's conversion and to situate it in the context of contemporaneous ascetic and political cultures.

The *MTK* Narrative[8]

Although temples in Kullu attest to Vishnu worship as early as the ninth century CE, the deity's incarnation as Raghunath, the official ruler of the valley and an object of devotional veneration on a state-wide basis, is linked to the seventeenth-century ruler Jagat Singh and to the unfortunate killing of a Brahmin.[9] The raja, goes the tale, was passing through a village on his way to the sacred hot springs of Manikaran when a rumour reached his entourage that a certain Brahmin was hiding a stash of pearls in his house. This fictitious claim, derived from 'grudge and jealousy' on the part of the Brahmin's family and neighbours, induced the royal attendants to demand that the treasure be handed over to the raja, the rightful owner of all property in the kingdom. After futilely denying possession of any such pearls, the Brahmin succumbed to the attendants' pressure and promised to deliver the non-existent treasure upon the raja's return from Manikaran. A few days later, he spotted the royal cortege making its way down the valley and immediately took his wife and children, locked them in his house and proceeded to set it on fire, feeding the flames with pieces of his own flesh while chanting, 'here raja, take this pearl!' with each stroke of the knife. By the time the procession reached the house, the Brahmin and his family were dead, and the pearls were nowhere to be found.

Hardyal Singh's writing was similarly despairing of the document, which he described as the compilation of 'some Pandit' of the royal family, in which 'every thing appears to have been antedated and each reign prolonged with the object of increasing the antiquity of the dynasty'; Lyall, *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement*, p. 112, fn 2.

[8] *MTK*, pp. 83–84 (sections 38–44). For later renderings of the story, see *HPHS*, pp. 458–60, which also makes use of the Kullu *vamshavali*, and Bhatnagar, *Kullū kā Itihās*, pp. 76–78, which relies on the latter works and local traditions. For an earlier cursory version, in which the ascetics are cast as Brahmins, see Lyall, *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement*, p. 111.

[9] The earliest inscription dedicated to Vishnu comes from the early modern period (1501) and is found on a mask of the deity (*muhra*) that is preserved in a traditional Pahari temple of the wooden type; see Handa, *Temple Architecture*, p. 167.

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Eaten with remorse for his inadvertent contribution to Brahminicide (*brahma-hatya*), the raja's grief was compounded with the discovery that the victim's ritual suicide had cast a curse upon his head: whatever dish he was served was instantaneously infested with worms, while his drink was transformed into blood. In his desperate search for a cure, the distraught raja followed the customary path by turning to a holy man, a certain '*vairagi*' sadhu, who lived in a cave near the capital. After carefully considering the situation, Kishan Das Pedhari (alias Krishna Das Payohari) announced that the raja's sole path for redemption lay in relinquishing the kingdom to the lord (*thakur*) Raghunath of Ayodhya. The raja readily agreed to the plan, but since he had never left the hills and did not know how to reach this exotic city in the plains, Payohari nominated one of his 'pupils' to the task instead. The *bairagi* Damodar Das, who was residing in the court of the neighbouring raja of Suket, was then summoned and, armed with a 'magic ball' ('*gutka siddh*') that conferred the power of invisibility and a 1,000 rupees in travel expenses (courtesy of Payohari), set off toward the plains to bring Raghunath to Kullu.[10]

Once in Ayodhya, Damodar settled in the house of a Brahmin, whence he made daily visits to the temple of Raghunath in order to spy on the priests and learn their habits. A few weeks later, the *bairagi* found an opportune moment when the temple was free of attendants and sprang into action: placing the pellet in his mouth and turning invisible, he snatched the god from its platform and hastily fled towards the hills. When the priests returned to the temple and discovered that Raghunath had been stolen, they sent their own man in pursuit of the thief. After a long and arduous journey, the priest Jodhavar (who was similarly aided by a magic pellet in his travels) finally caught up with the culprit on the banks of the Ganges in Haridwar. After confronting and reprimanding the thief for depriving the priests of their sole source of livelihood, the sadhu broke down and confessed the true purpose of his visit to Ayodhya, expounding upon the sufferings of the raja of Kullu and the decree of his guru, Payohari. Unable to decide who among them should keep the deity, the priest and the sadhu sent a letter to Kullu explaining their impasse. The wise Jagat Singh replied with a solution that was agreeable to both parties: Raghunath would be brought to reign over the mountain kingdom, while a portion of his daily offerings would henceforth be sent to the priests of Ayodhya. Having reached a satisfactory compromise, the ascetic and the priest took the deity and jointly parted for the hills.[11]

[10] The raja of Suket only agreed to the *bairagi*'s departure after receiving a letter from the authoritative Payohari. The *HPHS* version, however, omits Payohari and attributes the solution to the raja's plight to Damodar Das, a 'reputed Brahmin' of Suket, instead; *HPHS*, p. 458. Payohari nonetheless appears in a subsequent section as an unnamed sadhu who confers supernatural powers upon the raja; *ibid.*, p. 460.

[11] Echoing similar sectarian accounts from the region, the *HPHS* adds that the god signified its will to go to Kullu by rendering its image (*murti*) exceedingly heavy when the priest attempted to lift it, but becoming light as a feather in the sadhu's hands; *ibid.*, pp. 458–59.

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Upon arrival in Kullu, Raghunath was ceremoniously installed as sovereign and the raja assumed the role of custodian of state. A great sacrifice (*yajna*) and a lavish feast (*bhandaran*) were held for the numerous ascetics who had accompanied the deity on its journey and, with the curse removed, the raja became a devout follower (*bhakta*) of Raghunath and adopted Krishna Das Payohari as his guru. The latter spread 'the faith of Vishnu' throughout the valley and a host of *bairagi*s soon came to the kingdom carrying Vaishnava 'images' (*thakur*s) from the plains that were installed in 'orthodox' religious institutions (*thakurdwara*s) on state-gifted lands.[12] The raja's newfound religion also saw the severing of royal ties with Shaiva ascetics, with whom he had hitherto consulted prior to any decision in state and personal affairs. Some time later, the raja built a new residence further down the valley in Sultanpur (modern-day Kullu), which became a second capital and home to a new temple for Raghunath that is maintained by Jodhavar's progeny to this day. When not busy expanding his kingdom, Jagat Singh spent his time promoting *bhakti* Vaishnavism, retiring to Manikaran towards the end of his life to concentrate on the worship of Rama.

Ascetics and Politics in the Early Modern West Himalayas

The abrupt shift in the religious orientation of court and country described in the *MTK* adheres to the familiar pattern of 'conversion stories', where long-term social, religious and political changes are condensed in a narrative that revolves around a single event.[13] In order to unravel the relation between the story's myriad elements and historical realities, it is first necessary to account for the deep links tying political and ascetic cultures in the early modern West Himalayas. During the seventeenth century, these intertwined spheres of authority came under the influence of devotional Vaishnavas. This is clearly evident in the adoption of their deities from the plains by rulers other than Jagat Singh of Kullu, such as, the rajas of Chamba, Mandi, Nurpur and Sirmaur, who founded similar temples at around the same period.[14] These deities were almost always introduced by *bairagi* sadhus affiliated with *bhakti* communities, whose arrival was subsequently explained in a set pattern: (*i*) a solitary holy man works miracles and gains the raja's blessing to establish a temple on state land; (*ii*) followers of the sadhu establish additional temples in the kingdom and their belief system is introduced as a state religion; (*iii*) the movement's entrenchment in the locale is finalised with the establishment

[12] *Kullu and Saraj Gazetteer*, p. 55. The information seems to be based on architectural evidence, as many stone temples in the *sikhara* style that are devoted to Vaishnava deities date to this period.

[13] For a similar account from the region, in which the gradual incorporation of armed Jats into the Sikh community was retroactively explained as the initiative of Guru Gobind Singh during the Baisakh of 1699, see McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, especially pp. 44–45.

[14] The temples were dedicated to Raghuvir, Madho Rao, Brijraj and Jagannath, respectively. The official relinquishing of a raja's rule for that of a deity, however, only took place in Kullu and Mandi.

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of local communities of followers and the settlement of additional sadhus in the kingdom. This idealised vision of the establishment of new cults may be revised with a more socio-historical description: (*i*) peripatetic ascetics venture into a kingdom and gain the raja's favour by supplying spiritual, military and/or economic support; (*ii*) the sadhus become sufficiently powerful to attract extensive royal patronage, which leads to the foundation of a temple for their presiding deity in the capital and is usually accompanied by the adoption of their belief system as a state religion; (*iii*) the peripatetic sadhus establish permanent settlements in the kingdom and/or are joined by sedentary temple officiates affiliated with their movement, culminating in their integration into its socio-political fabric through intermarriage with autochthonous inhabitants.[15]

That this three-tiered outline can be used to describe the interactions of Himalayan rulers with ascetics of other religious persuasions is significant in underlining the backdrop of *bairagi* expansion into the West Himalayas, where a highly developed and diverse ascetic culture harbouring deep links with political powers pre-existed the Vaishnavas' arrival in Kullu.[16] If, as Pinch contends, popular religion in seventeenth-century India was essentially 'defined' by asceticism,[17] then that of the West Himalayas was practically consumed by it: Shaiva and Shakta ascetics (Nath sadhus, Dasnami sannyasins, yogis, etc.), Tibetan *tantrika*s and Sikh gurus permeated the Pahari landscape and, with the exception of the latter, had already established ties with local rulers before the *bairagi*s' arrival. Apart from their mention at the conclusion of the *MTK* narrative, these groups' anterior presence may also be deduced from allusions to magic and ritual practices. The mercurial pellet or *gutika siddh* that enabled the *bairagi* emissary to turn invisible, for example, is a device that is commonly associated with Shaiva yogis.[18] The description of the same object as a 'magic manual' in the *HPHS* is also telling, for although stemming from a misreading of '*gutika*' (pellet) as '*gutka*' (manual), it conveys prevailing attitudes towards sorcery in the hills, where manuals granting supernatural powers (*siddhi*s)

[15] The centuries of Vaishnava ascetic involvement in the kingdom of Sirmaur (south of Shimla) are illustrative of this process. The establishment of a new capital in Nahan in 1621 is thus linked to the presence of a *bairagi* saint, while popular tradition describes how ('*gosain*') ascetics tilted the outcome of an important battle by hurling magic arrows at the enemy from the sky; see Singh, *Sirmaur Riyāsat kā Itihās*, p. 204, and Rose, 'Mohiye ki Har', respectively. Today, the central shrine in the temple of Jagannath in Nahan hosts a variety of sacred images that are, according to its priests, the legacy of peripatetic ascetic groups that came under its influence. The links between the *bairagi*s at the temple and the Sirmauri royals are manifest in their centrality to state-level celebrations, and in their possession of (at least in the beginning of the twentieth century) a copy of the royal *vamshavali*; see *Sirmur State Gazetteer 1934*, pp. 10–11.

[16] For a similar pattern among Kanphata ('split-eared') Naths in West Nepal, see Bouillir, 'Growth and Decay', especially p. 153.

[17] Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*, p. 82.

[18] The reference is most likely to the mercurial pellets or *gutika*s used to gain supernatural powers (*siddhi*s); *ibid.*, p. 53.

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circulated in various social circles, including among the nobility. This was clearly the case of raja Siddh Sen (r. 1684–1717) of Mandi (immediately south of Kullu), who is said to have defeated a Deccani Brahmin by use of a 'book of magic' that he had received from a 'Chinese' (i.e., Tibetan) 'Nath guru', and which he threw into a river shortly before his death lest it fall into the wrong hands and become 'a source of great evil and disaster'.[19]

The *MTK*'s confidence in the eradication of Shaiva and Shakta influence following the Kullu raja's conversion notwithstanding, ascetics of these groups remained central to the Pahari landscape long after the spread of Vaishnavism in the hills. This is clearly the case in Pindori Dham, a Punjabi institution that played an important part in proselytising devotional Vaishnavism among the hill chiefs (more on this below), where the nomination of new abbots (*mahant*s) was and continues to be ratified by the presence of Shaiva yogis from the anterior institution of Jakhbar, whose conspicuous conical hats figure prominently in wall paintings and on the resting places (*samadhi*s) of Pindori's past *mahant*s.[20] The *bairagi*s who entered the hills thus not only acknowledged the importance of these concurrent movements, but also relied on their acceptance even after their apparent entrenchment in the region. It is important to bear the connection between the different religious currents and the rulers of the hills in mind, for the privileging of a Vaishnava viewpoint in the sectarian sources that are addressed in the following sections did not signify their competitors' demise.[21] Having situated the *MTK* narrative in its temporal and cultural context, it is now possible to address the historical realities behind its various elements. A useful place to begin

[19] Singh, *History of Mandi State*, pp. 55–56. Note the enmeshment of ascetic traditions in the account of Siddh Sen, where the Tibetan Tantrika is named 'Taranath', a figure commonly associated with the Kanphata yogis as the archetypal opponent of *bairagi*s in Vaishnava sources. Another reading of *gutka* as the 'magic amulet' Siddh Sen is reputed to have worn around his neck and which enabled him 'to fly each morning to the source of the river Ganga from Mandi and to return in time to attend to affairs of state' corresponds to representation in a Mandi miniature painting; see Fischer and Goswamy, *Pahari Masters*, pp. 194–95.

[20] Goswamy and Grewal, *Vaishnavas of Pindori*, pp. 5–6, and Goswamy and Grewal, *Jogis of Jakhbar*, p. 15. For evidence of close ties between Aurangzeb and the Shaivas of Jakhbar in the early 1660s consult *ibid.*, pp. 32–34 and 120–24, for an imperial *farman* dated 1661–62, in which the yogis are reprimanded for furnishing Delhi with quicksilver of inferior quality.

[21] The influence of non-Vaishnava ascetics persisted under British rule. The administration of state and foreign relations in nineteenth-century Mandi, for example, remained in the hands of the all-powerful 'wazir gosain' (d. 1870); see Singh, *History of Mandi State*, pp. 115–17, 123, and *TRZK*, p. 61, for the wazir's commercial enterprises in the hills in collaboration with Sikh rulers. *Gosain* bankers similarly held the entire nobility of the kingdom of Bashahr (southeast of Kullu) in debt in the 1850s, while Shaiva 'giri' ascetics in Kangra (southwest of Kullu) dominated the lucrative opium trade with Tibet and Central Asia (via Kullu) into the 1880s; see Barnes, 'Memorandum', pp. 129–30, and Powell, *Hand-book*, Vol. I, pp. 296–97, respectively. Finally, the overlap of the political boundaries of the kingdom of Kangra with the pilgrimage route described in an 1864 manual affords further evidence of the close ties between ascetic and Rajput authorities; see Prahladanandacarya, *Jalandharpithdipika* (with a map on p. 4).

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is with the raja's mysterious guru and his links to the pan-Indian movement of Ramanandis.

The Spread of Vaishnavism to Kullu: The Ramanandi Perspective

In the absence of contemporaneous documentary evidence, deciphering the identity of the ascetics behind the introduction of Vaishnavsim into Kullu must rely on the characters and places alluded to in the *MTK* narrative. The raja's guru is key to this enquiry, for apart from his prominence in local tradition, Krishna Das Payohari is renowned in devotional Vaishnava circles as the founder of the Ramanandi centre of Galta in eastern Rajasthan at the beginning of the sixteenth century. By reading sectarian sources in conjunction with recent studies on the Ramanandi *sampraday*, this section traces the path of devotional Vaishnavism's expansion into Kullu from Payohari's Galta through the sub-lineage of Pindori in the Punjab.

Krishna Das Payohari in Kullu

A towering master of the Ramanandi *sampraday*, Krishna Das Payohari (fl. 1500), is most widely remembered as the founder of the religious centre in Galta in eastern Rajasthan.[22] The movement's foundational text, the *Bhaktamala* ('garland of devotees', hereafter *BM*), explains the centre's establishment in a vein similar to that found in the Kullu narrative; namely, as a conversion story centred around the Rajput ruler of Amer (Amber, near Galta), Prithvi Raj Kacchvaha (r. 1503–27), and Payohari's overpowering of anterior Shaiva ascetics. Thus, if the ancestors of the rulers of Jaipur had earlier followed the Kanphata yogi Taranath, Payohari's arrival and defeat of the latter in a magic contest (by turning his adversary into a donkey) saw royal patronage shift in favour of Vaishnavism and the establishment of the Ramanandis in Galta.[23] Although this folkloric account was only integrated into the *BM* in the beginning of the twentieth century (and possibly originates in earlier oral traditions), Payohari's prominence is also evident in earlier portions of the text.

As William Pinch has shown, the *BM* consists of several 'layers': a core text that was written by Nabhadas in Galta c. 1600 that is devoted to stories of saints and gurus; a second recension (1712) by Priyadas, a Gaudiya bhakta based in Braj, which adds numerous stories of saints and royal patrons; and a third edition by Bhagvan Prasad that supplements popular traditions and gloss in the peculiar

[22] On the Ramanandis' evolution from an eleventh/twelfth century 'Ramaite' cult focused on complex rituals to an inclusive devotionalist (*bhakti*) movement in the sixteenth century, see Bakker, *Ayodhyā*, Part I, pp. 60–66. On the recruitment of lower castes, women and untouchables as facilitating this growth, consult Pinch, *Peasants and Monks*, pp. 23–47 (Chapter 1). For an overview of the different phases of Ramanandi presence in Galta, see Horstmann, 'Ramanandis of Galta'.

[23] Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*, p. 19, which emphasises the qualitative difference between the two sadhus' magical powers (*siddhi*s): the Shaiva wielding magic with the aim of gaining worldly benefits, whereas the Vaishnava uses the same tools in pursuit of union with a transcendental, all-encompassing divinity.

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spirit of service (*seva*) that characterised early twentieth-century British India.[24] While Payohari appears in each of these textual layers, the first mention of Kullu is found in verses (*kavitt*s) 119–120 of the second recension by Priyadas.[25] It is said that an 'unnamed raja of Kullu' held a feast (*bhandār*) for *bairagi* sadhus in honour of his guru, Krishna Das Payohari. At one point, the raja noticed his infant son collect sweets that had fallen from a copiously laden tray and, as children are wont to do, begin to eat them. Enraged that the child had not offered the sweets to the deity before putting them in his mouth, the raja unsheathed his sword and was about to behead the boy when the guru stepped forth and dissuaded him from the act. The prince subsequently grew into a grand patron of Vaishnavism like his father before him. That a Vaishnava devotionalist in Braj deemed this story worthy of inclusion in the *BM* suggests that, 60 years after the adoption of Raghunath as state deity, the ruler of 'the end of the habitable [Hindu] world' (*kulant*),[26] as Kullu is often described, had come to exemplify devotionalism among Vaishnava circles in the subcontinent, and his kingdom a significant centre of patronage for its adherents.

Ascertaining the veracity behind the *BM*'s implied link between the Ramanandis of eastern Rajasthan and the remote Himalayan state is not without problems. For one, the text's sectarian provenance dictates a convolution of *itihasa-purana* and *guru-parampara* modes of writing that detracts from its factual reliability. The text thus locates the early sixteenth-century spiritual master of Rajasthan in mid-seventeenth-century Kullu, according Payohari the generous lifespan of (at least) 150 years. This is compounded by the appearance of the story of the overzealous raja of Kullu in the *MTK*, where he is explicitly identified as Jagat Singh.[27] In order to explain the guru of Galta's presence in the Himalayas more than a century after his establishment in Rajasthan, it is necessary to examine the actual path pursued by Ramanandis in their expansion into Kullu; a path that links Payohari of Galta with another saintly sadhu of exceptional longevity, Bhagwan (alias Bhagwanji) of Pindori.

[24] The differences between these layers reflect changing attitudes within the *sampraday*: the original text's authoring by a low caste/untouchable testifies to the inclusive social agenda of early Ramanandis; the second recension reflects the rapprochement of Ramanandis and political leaders during the seventeenth century; the third layer, which saw the beginnings of mass circulation of the text in print, attests to a new phase of class struggles within the movement. For cogent examples of Priyadas's elaboration on Nabhdas's cursory notes on Ramanandi saints and royal patrons, see Pinch, 'Nabhadas of Galta', pp. 389–92. On the religious notions underlying Bhagvan Prasad's edition, consult idem, '*Bhakti* and the British Empire'.

[25] Translated in Pinch, 'Nabhadas of Galta', p. 391.

[26] Despite its recurrence (e.g., Penelope Chetwode's book), the term is, in fact, a 'fanciful' misnomer for the original 'Kuluta'; see *HPHS*, p. 416, fn 2.

[27] *MTK*, p. 84. The difficulty of dating Payohari's sojourn in Kullu is thus reintroduced into the *BM*, which lauds him as the founder of Galta in the core text (c. 1600), while mentioning him as the 'unnamed' raja's guru in the second recension (1712).

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Galta–Pindori–Kullu

The son of Brahmin villagers from what is today Gurdaspur district in the Indian Punjab, Bhagwanji (d. 1659) is credited with the founding of the Vaishnava seat (*dham*) of Pindori at some point during the first half of the sixteenth century.[28] As in Kullu and Galta, Pindori tradition acknowledges the earlier presence of Nath ascetics by attributing Bhagwanji's miraculous birth to a boon granted to his parents by the ubiquitous Ramanandi opponent, the Kanphata yogi Taranath (on ritual reflections of this connection, see 'Ascetics and Politics' section, above). It was only after travelling to Rajasthan, where he adopted Krishna Das Payohari as guru, that Bhagwanji became a follower of devotional Vaishnavism and was charged with spreading its doctrine in his natal region, which resulted in the establishment of Pindori Dham. As the documents presented by B.N. Goswamy and J.S. Grewal make clear, the institution and the spiritual lineage it represented expanded rapidly, earning the patronage of various political leaders in the process, from regional Sikh magnates to the Mughal emperors of Delhi.[29] Soon after its foundation, Pindori made significant inroads into the neighbouring courts of the West Himalayas. The rajas of Nurpur, whose territory adjoined the plains, were the first to come under its influence, becoming followers of its *mahant*s by 1676 and subsequently maintaining close ties with the daughter *matha* of Damtal on the boundary of their domain. A similar institution was founded further southeast in Bathu sometime before 1718, whose *mahant*s continued to command the respect of the local rajas of Guler well into the twentieth century.[30]

Its impressive expansion into the hills aside, there is no documentary evidence that Pindori Dham's influence ever extended as far as Kullu. While Payohari's prominence in both Kullu and Pindori traditions hints at a connection between the sites, it is equally true that the founder of Galta cut sufficiently grand a figure to

[28] Evidence for the life of Bhagwanji and the foundation of Pindori is inconclusive. I follow Goswamy and Grewal in taking 1659 as his probable date of death, which is based on a note in a Pindori manuscript and is coeval with the adoption of Vaishnavsim by Jagat Singh in Kullu; see Goswamy and Grewal, *Vaishnavas of Pindori*, p. 11. The dates provided by other sources rarely agree: an early twentieth-century account from Guler dates Bhagwanji's death to 1622; the locally authored *Pindori Dham ka Itihas* (1961) dates his birth to 1493; and Ghurye's *Indian Sadhus* (p. 166) claims he lived for 174 years (1449–1623), founding Pindori Dham at some point after 1572; *ibid.*, p. 8, fn 30, which erroneously dates Payohari's activities to the beginning of the seventeenth century.

[29] See the comprehensive introduction and reproduced documents *ibid*. The earliest of these documents is nonetheless rather late, dating to 1685.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 12–15. The ties between Pindori and its related centres were not always amicable. Damtal, which was founded to appease a senior member of the Pindori lineage who had been barred from succeeding as *mahant*, was particularly averse to the Dham. A document from Pindori reveals that, on at least one occasion, a member of the Dham was attacked by sadhus from Damtal, although the aggression was subsequently masked as the initiative of Shaiva sannyasins; *ibid.*, document IV and the summary on p. 15.

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be invoked by Vaishnava *bhakta*s affiliated with other *guru-parampara* lineages in order to bolster their authority.[31] One method of distinguishing between the *bairagi* lineages active in the hills during this period is to trace the deities whose worship they promoted (e.g., Raghunath in Kullu, Jagannath in Sirmaur). These deities were, after all, the perceived source of the *bairagi*s' powers, which could only be accessed through specialised knowledge of ritual protocols specific to each deity and which were shared by those affiliated with its *guru-parampara*.[32] In this respect, the fact that Raghunath is tutelary deity in both Kullu and Pindori becomes acutely relevant since it indicates that the propagators of *rambhakti* in the Himalayan valley were connected with the spiritual lineage of Bhagwanji.

Another indicator of ties between Kullu and Pindori can be found in a popular account from the valley regarding the first meeting between Jagat Singh and Payohari.[33] The sadhu, it is said, was meditating in a cave when he sensed the raja's imminent arrival and transformed himself into a tiger. When the king entered the cave, he simply lifted the beast with his hand, at which point Payohari resumed human form, complimented the raja for his 'true Kshatriya' nature and accepted him as his disciple. The encounter was sealed with a prophecy that is commonly paraphrased in the saying: 'eight generations will rule in [the erstwhile capital] Makarsa, the ninth in Pandori; after that, whoever follows Raghunath best shall rule' (*āṭh pīṛhī Makaṛsā, navīm pīṛhī Pamḍorī/ bād mein vahī rāj kar, jiskī raghunāth par ḍorī*).[34] The implied supremacy of the Pindori establishment aside, the story and the saying clearly point to a link between Kullu and the Dham. Moreover, in omitting Bhagwanji and referring to the pan-Ramanandi figure of Payohari instead, the story enforces the mountain kingdom's ties with the broader

[31] On a similar use of the persona of Ramanand to unify a plethora of Vaishnava movements to form the Ramanandi *sampraday*, see Burghart, 'Founding of the Ramanandi Sect', which erroneously dates the process to the fourteenth century. Purushottam Agrawal has since established Ramanand's floruit in the fifteenth century through a close reading of several contemporaneous sources, which also reveal the considerable extent of textual manipulation by conflicting parties in the Ramanandi *sampraday* of the early twentieth century; see Agrawal, 'In Search of Ramanand'.

[32] The same logic would cast doubt on the ties between Pindori and Galta, since the deity Payohari introduced to his Kachvaha Rajput patrons is Sitaram and *not* Raghunath, the supreme deity of Pindori. However, extensive renovation and construction activities in Galta begun in the 1620s saw the temple of Sitaram converted into a grander complex in honour of Raghunath, which is today the largest ritual space on site. Moreover, when Raja Jai Singh II (r. 1700–34) founded Jaipur as his new capital c. 1727, the image of Sitaram was moved to a new temple in the city, suggesting that while the deity may have remained central to the Kachvaha dynasty, the Ramanandis of Galta—like their offshoots in Pindori—deemed Raghunath more important; see Horstmann, 'Ramanandis of Galta', pp. 148, 157. For more on Sitaram as the Kachvahas' state deity, see Clémentin-Ojha, *Le trident sur le palais*, pp. 28–29.

[33] *MTK*, p. 84, as well as *HPHS*, pp. 460–61, which casts Payohari as 'a Brahmin sadhu'.

[34] Bhatnagar, *Kullū kā Itihās*, p. 77. The dissolution of Kullu as an independent kingdom in the ninth generation is either coincidental (if the saying predates the beginning of British rule in 1846) or anachronistic (after 1846).

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world of the *sampraday* beyond its Punjabi sub-lineage. Finally, sustained popular belief in the guru's links with the valley can be found in a cave in which the guru is said to have dwelt that is still pointed out by locals today, a tradition sustained by the royal family's worship of a quilt (*gudṛī*) and sandals that are said to have belonged to Payohari.[35] Having delineated the path of Ramanandi expansion from Galta to Kullu via Pindori, it remains to be seen how the ties between the parties came about in the first place and what purposes they might have served. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to enquire into the internal divisions of the *sampraday* and their reflection in the *MTK*.

Warriors, Renunciants and Temple Dwellers

Although the Ramanandi *sampraday* hosts a dazzling plethora of groups, for the sake of analysis these may be broadly divided into renunciant (*tyagi*), warrior (*naga*) and temple-dwelling (*rasik*) ascetics, each of which interacted with the kingdom of Kullu in different ways at various points in time.[36] This section examines the nature of these relationships and of their representation in the *MTK*. The closely related peripatetic and fighting ascetics are linked with the early phase of devotional Vaishnavism in Kullu (c. 1500–1650), which was intensified with the incorporation of *bairagi* armies as a central component of the kingdom's military in the eighteenth century. The role of sedentary temple officiates is then tied with the timing of Raghunath's introduction as state deity, while the emphasis on the triad of sadhu, priest and royal patron that is advanced in Kullu tradition is revealed to be an anachronism reflective of issues that only became important after the adoption of devotional Vaishnavism as a state religion. Finally, the omission of Galta and the interpolation of Ayodhya in the Pahari account point to the rise of multiple centres of Ramanandi authority in the eighteenth century, and also elucidates the political underpinnings of Kullu patronage of Vaishnavism in the era of Mughal dominance.

Warrior Ascetics and Pahari State Formation

Although Jagat Singh and Krishna Das Payohari may have never actually met (given that they lived a century and a half apart), the widespread belief that the sadhu spent some time in the valley and the evidence of *bairagi* presence in neighbouring courts indicate that Vaishnava ascetics were already frequenting Kullu prior to its raja's 'conversion'. The persons involved in this early phase were most likely peripatetic sadhus with a certain degree of military training who belonged to the broader world

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 78, and Berti, 'Kings, Gods and Political Leaders', p. 110, respectively. A similar cloth associated with Bhagwanji of Pindori is also worshipped in Bathu, Guler; Goswamy and Grewal, *Vaishnavas of Pindori*, p. 18.

[36] This threefold division agrees with the Ramanandis' internal classification and follows the analytical framework outlined by Peter van der Veer in his pioneering study, *Gods on Earth*.

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of warrior ascetics then roaming the subcontinent, and whose swelling numbers and increasingly sophisticated weaponry would transform into a 'regular and valued component of the military economy of northern India by 1800'.[37] While this was clearly the case in eighteenth-century Kullu (see below), the beginnings of these sadhus' involvement in the valley are far from clear.

The anterior presence of (most likely also armed) Shaiva ascetics suggests that armed *bairagi*s were part of the Pahari landscape from at least the sixteenth century. That these were in contact with local political powers is highly likely, for if the Mughal emperor himself intervened in clashes between their itinerant armies in the not too distant plains of Thaneswar in 1567, the substantially weaker Pahari rulers would have most likely also engaged—let alone actively sought out alliances—with such mobile contingents of magic-wielding warriors. The claim of local historian Satyapal Bhatnagar that the *bairagi akhara*s of Kullu town (formerly Sultanpur) were established in 1525 suggests that this was indeed the case.[38] Although he does not back this assertion with a source, Bhatnagar's deep knowledge of Kullu history and culture warrants its careful consideration. If valid, it would indicate that *bairagi* ties with the kingdom predated the 'conversion' of Jagat Singh by more than a century and that these were of a pronouncedly military nature. This would also help explain the expulsion of the last of the 'Piti thakurs' from the higher reaches of the valley a few years after the *akhara*s' establishment and the subsequent entrenchment of a new dynasty in power, which would have thus benefited from the support of warrior sadhus.[39]

While the propensity of Pahari traditions to interpolation renders it equally plausible that the sadhus frequenting Kullu prior to 1661 were Shaiva, Shakta and/or Tibetan ascetics that were only later labelled *bairagi*s, there is reason to believe that these were at least partly affiliated with Vaishnavism. As James Mallinson persuasively argues, relations between ascetics of diverse religious orientations were significantly more fluid prior to the eighteenth century. Cross-referencing sectarian sources in Sanskrit with depictions of yogis in Mughal miniature paintings, Mallinson shows that Shaiva ascetics (specifically Naths and Dasnamis) were, on at least one occasion, followers of Vaishnava *mahant*s. Thus, the affinities of the *rambhakta*s who flocked to Kullu following Raghunath's installation as sovereign

[37] Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*, p. 77.

[38] The *akhara*s (lit., 'wrestling rings') still function as centres where peripatetic sadhus congregate. Those in contemporary Kullu host members of the Digambar, Khākī, Danvāṇ and Gudaṛ orders; see Bhatnagar, *Kullū kā Itihās*, p. 93.

[39] *HPHS*, p. 450. For more on the centuries-long struggles between Kullu and encroachers from its eastern neighbour, Spiti (and, to a lesser extent, from Lahaul on its north), consult *ibid.*, pp. 432–34, 447–50, and *MTK*, p. 75. The 'Tibetan' presence was primarily limited to the high-altitude region on the northeast of the valley, which offered control of the trade route linking Ladakh (via Lahaul) and Kinnaur. The credit for these victories, however, was primarily attributed to local goddesses; the elaborate temples constructed in their honour in the sixteenth century suggesting the power derived from the supposed service of armed ascetics was considered secondary to that granted by local deities.

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with anterior sadhus, from the use of mercurial pellets to the open acknowledgement of the latter's prominence in ritual ceremonies, does not necessarily imply an anachronistic recasting of Shaiva ascetics as Vaishnavas, but may hint at a considerably more complex and hitherto unexplored aspect of ascetic culture, in which inter-sectarian collaboration was a feasible reality.[40]

The evidence for the involvement of armed *bairagi*s in Kullu from the eighteenth century is more conclusive and directly linked with the Ramanandi *sampraday*'s transformation from an open-ended community of devotees to an elaborately structured one.[41] The armed (*naga*) branch of Ramanandis, which had already secured imperial recognition by the 1690s, was thus further professionalised with the formation of official 'armies' (*ani*s) in Galta in 1734.[42] The repercussions of these sweeping changes were clearly felt in the West Himalayas. Raja Man Singh (r. 1688–1719) of Kullu, for example, is popularly remembered as having renounced the throne to become a *bairagi*,[43] hinting at close ties between his rule and Vaishnava ascetics and possibly explaining the kingdom's unprecedented territorial expansion during his reign.

The reliance on *bairagi* warriors is altogether explicit in the case of Tedhi ('the crooked') Singh (r. ~1738–67). Having come to power upon the abrupt abdication of his predecessor and rival, Jai Singh (d. 1744), Tedhi Singh faced fervent opposition from Pahari chiefs and subjects alike. After twice being imprisoned by his adversary's uncle, the raja of Siba (an offshoot of Kangra), the raja still had to contend with a starkly indignant populace. The established method of instating authority through the execution of rebellious headmen having failed, the raja was saved by the timely appearance of *bairagi* warriors in the valley:

> Suddenly, as luck favoured, one thousand *vairagi*s came from the Punjab in order to spend [the] four rainy months in the hills. They had been coming since the time of raja Jagat Singh, because they were given very good treatment by the state. Raja Tedhi Singh employed them in his service … the rebels were killed and some others were tied, [and] as a mark for distinguishing [them], [an] iron ring [was pierced] in one … ear and [one] of silver in the other. The Raja of

[40] Mallinson, 'Unity and Difference among Medieval Indian Ascetics'.

[41] The institutionalisation of the movement may be deduced from the appearance of 'Ramanandi' as a self-designating term in Galta documents from the 1730s onwards; Horstmann, 'Ramanandis of Galta', p. 145.

[42] *Ibid*., pp. 157–70. For Aurangzeb's order of 1692/93 which afforded *bairagi* contingents (along with drums and insignia) unhindered passage through Mughal territory, see Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics*, p. 72 (citing Orr, 'Armed Religious Ascetics', p. 87). On the problems of identifying which social groups entered Ramanandi service as warriors, see Pinch, *Peasants and Monks*, pp. 24–30.

[43] For a transcribed folksong recounting this event, see Sharma (ed.), *Himachal Pradesh ki Lokgathayen*, pp. 147–48. For a similar case of 'transgression' between Rajput rulers and Nath sadhus in nineteenth-century Jodhpur, consult Gold, 'The Instability of the King'.

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> Kangra [Siba] then observing Tedhi Singh triumphant despatched [a] *chomwari* [conch?], [and a] *morchal* (peacock feather) to Tedhi Singh and recognised him as Raja of Kullu.[44]

As this cursory passage from the *MTK* indicates, the peripatetic *bairagi*s frequenting Kullu in the 1740s were clearly a force to be reckoned with. No longer solitary magic-wielders with loose ties to local rulers, the organised contingents of sadhus had significant clout in Pahari politics, their intervention being the sole means for Tedhi Singh to gain recognition from his neighbour and fiercest opponent.[45] The text further notes that Kullu had become a regular halting place on the itinerary of peripatetic *bairagi*s 'from the Punjab' (i.e., Pindori), a path that necessarily passed through the Kangra Valley and that would help explain their conspicuous visibility in Pahari kingdoms in this period. That the wandering sadhus' custom of spending the four months of the rainy season (*caturmās*) is linked to the 'official' introduction of Vaishnavism as a state religion under Jagat Singh is unsurprising, although, as noted earlier, it may also predate the raja's reign.[46] Finally, the punishment of the remaining rebels by placing marks on their ears resonates with the hallmark of Kanphata ('split-eared') yogis and underlines the rivalry between the raja's henchmen and their sectarian opponents.

The allusion to non-Vaishnava sadhus also sheds light on the potent relations that existed between ascetic movements and segments of Pahari society exclusive of the raja. As the succeeding paragraphs of the text suggest, it is not improbable that such concurrent groups lent support to the Kullu rebels. According to the *MTK*, the continuing tensions between Tedhi Singh and his subjects exploded with the 'miraculous' return of his abdicating predecessor into the valley some time after the *bairagi*s' intervention. The contender, who is alternately described as a '*faqir*' and a Shaiva '*sunyasin*', was groomed to play the part of the departed Jai Singh by the raja's opponents with the aim of swaying public opinion in their favour. The successful ploy resulted in a popular revolt that was only squashed upon the return of the former raja's servants to the kingdom from Haridwar with their late master's ashes, which inevitably unmasked the ruse.[47]

[44] *MTK*, p. 92. In another version of the story, the *bairagi*s are gradually enlisted as the raja's bodyguards. The rebels are then invited to the palace for a feast, where they are encouraged to drink to inebriation, at which point the *bairagi*s pounce upon the assembled from a place of hiding and put 360 of them to death; *HPHS*, p. 465.

[45] On the raja of Siba's schemes for preventing Tedhi Singh from coming to power, see *ibid.*, and *MTK*, pp. 90–91.

[46] On the annual pilgrimage cycle of Vaishnava ascetics, see Burghart, 'Wandering Ascetics of the Rāmānandī Sect', pp. 364–67.

[47] *MTK*, p. 92, *HPHS*, p. 466, and Lyall, *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement*, p. 112, which casts the imposter as 'a Sanyasi faqir, who had formed a connection with a Patra (Hindu dancing girl) who had accompanied Jye Singh in his flight from Kulu … [and with whose] assistance he contrived to answer questions, so as to deceive [the people] … as to his identity'. For pictorial representations attesting to

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The armed monks who formed the backbone of Tedhi Singh's military ultimately disappeared from the Kullu landscape, either by directing their travels elsewhere or by settling in the valley to pursue a sedentary lifestyle. In doing so, they joined another central component of the *sampraday* that had arrived in the kingdom at the time of Jagat Singh, that of sedentary devotionalist (*rasik*) sadhus who officiated as temple priests. It is this latter group that is behind another major interpolation of the *MTK* narrative, which concerns the appearance of Ayodhya in the story of Jagat Singh's conversion.

Ayodhya and Kullu: Mughals, Rajputs and Bhaktas

The claim of Kullu tradition that Raghunath came from Ayodhya counters what has been shown as the likely path of Ramanandi expansion from Galta via Pindori. This discrepancy could have been dismissed as the result of the *MTK*'s tendency to superimpose contemporaneous conditions on narrative content, which would agree with Ayodhya's eclipsing of Galta as a centre of Ramanandi activity at the time of Hardyal Singh's writing (c. 1885). However, the latter's reliance on the Kullu rajas' genealogical role (*vamshavali*) renders this unlikely insofar as the provenance of the deity would have been sufficiently important to merit mention in the earlier phases of the text's composition. Moreover, Ayodhya features prominently in other Kullu traditions—most notably as the place from where Jagat Singh brought a flute (*murali*) to a temple in his capital—even as the mountain kingdom concurrently figures in popular accounts from the City of Rama (see below).[48] These multiple references suggest that there is more to the ties between Kullu and Ayodhya than mere literary devices that are intended to augment Vaishnava authority. As with the alleged presence of Payohari in the Himalayas, the significance of Ayodhya can be explained by examining the city's relations with the Ramanandi *sampraday*.

Although peripatetic ascetics of the Ramanandi order today cite Ayodhya as their 'fixed address', the city's rise to prominence as a pilgrimage site of pan-Indian importance dates to the eighteenth century.[49] According to Ramanandi tradition, members of the *sampraday* first settled in the city in the seventeenth century with

proximity between the coeval rajas of Mandi and Shaiva ascetics, see Fischer and Goswamy, *Pahari Masters*, pp. 200–03.

[48] On the flute (*murali*) that rendered the early Kullu capital of Makrasa a 'second Ayodhya and Braj', see *HPHS*, p. 461, *MTK*, p. 85, and Shastri, 'Historical Documents', p. 121. The choice of object and the explicit mention of the Krishnaite centre of Braj attest to the open-ended nature of Vaishnava devotionalist movements in this period, a fact readily apparent in the second recension of the *Bhaktamala*'s authorship by a Gaudiya *bhakta* rather than a 'proper' Ramanandi. For more on the political background that contributed to the vitality the Braj region (Mathura–Vrindavan) in the early modern era, see Pauwels, 'The Saint, the Warlord, and the Emperor'.

[49] Burghart, 'Wandering Ascetics of the Rāmānandī Sect', p. 365. The association of sites in Ayodhya with the life of Rama dates to the sixteenth century; see Bakker, *Ayodhyā*, p. 165, and Bakker, 'The Rise of Ayodhyā', for a concise review of textual, epigraphic and archeological evidence of its increased importance in the early modern era.

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greater waves following at the beginning of the next century, most likely in reaction to Jai Singh II's (r. 1700–34) extensive reforms in Jaipur.[50] Contrary to the Galta patron's intrusive policies, the cosmopolitanism of Awadh's Shiite nobility nurtured the inclusion of various religious currents, which allowed the Ramanandis to flourish. It is thus at this stage that the 'Jaipuri' or Sitaram Temple was constructed in Ayodhya and that *bairagi* warriors of the contemporaneously formed 'armies' (*ani*s) of Galta first settled in its *akhara*s with their headquarters in the 'Hanuman Fort' (Hanumangarhi).[51]

The shift in Ramanandi activity also affected the Ramanandi centre at Pindori, which went to great lengths to establish additional spiritual centres (*gaddi*s) in the city. Thus, of the 39 seats issuing from Bhagwanji's lineage, nearly half are situated near the original site (Punjab, Haryana and Delhi regions), five in Ayodhya, one in Varanasi (founded in the beginning of the eighteenth century), three in Himachal Pradesh, and the remainder scattered in different parts of the country (including Maharashtra, Hyderabad and Gujarat).[52] While the precise point at which these establishments came into being remains unclear, the pronounced presence of ascetics affiliated with Pindori in Ayodhya suggests a lengthy involvement in the city that could date to the seventeenth century, thereby explaining the seemingly arbitrary connection between the *bairagi*s of the Punjabi Dham and Raghunath's provenance in Ayodhya. Even were this not the case, it is safe to assume that peripatetic sadhus of Bhagwanji's lineage spoke of Kullu and its generous rajas in their encounters with laymen and monks during their journeys in the subcontinent, which would have included annual congregations in Ayodhya to celebrate the birth of Rama. Alongside the introduction of the story of the zealous Kullu raja and Payohari in the second recension of the *BM* (1712), such oral exchanges would have invariably afforded the kingdom a privileged position in the Ramanandi imagination. Ayodhya popular tradition regarding the temple of Tretnath or 'the lord of the Treta Age (*yuga*)' (i.e., Rama), whence Raghunath first came to Kullu according to the *MTK*, is a case in point.

[50] The reforms were part of a state-building plan intended to legitimate Jai Singh II's rule and counter the instabilities concomitant with the increasingly fragmentised (yet powerful) sectarian movements in Jaipur. For the Ramanandis, these reforms began with a conference in 1712 and culminated in the imposition of marriage on Galta's *mahant*s by the 1730s, a decree that was spared its armed component and consequently fed further tensions between these different branches of the *sampraday*; see Horstmann, 'Visions of Kingship', and Horstmann, 'Ramanandis of Galta', pp. 157–64.

[51] Bakker, *Ayodhyā*, pp. 147–53. The shift in the focus of Ramanandi activity was also expressed in new texts that espoused the merits of Ayodhya as the supreme place of pilgrimage for Vaishnava *bhakta*s; see Paramasiva, V. 'Yah Ayodhyā Vah Ayodhyā'.

[52] For the complete list of *gaddi*s, see Sinha and Saraswati, *Ascetics of Kashi*, p. 20. The information is derived from Pritam Ziyat's *Pindori Dham ka Itihas* (1961) and is based on a manuscript history by Pujari Krishnadas, which was written in Pindori at the time of Mahant Brahm Das (1887–1908); Goswamy and Grewal, *Vaishnavas of Pindori*, p. 4, fn 11. Neither text was forthcoming at the time of writing.

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According to Ayodhya lore, the temple of Tretnath used to flank the city's *svargdvara* ghat until its destruction and replacement with a mosque by a 'Mughal Emperor'. By the nineteenth century, a popular belief held that the rebuilding of the temple (near the original site) was commissioned a few decades after its destruction (c. 1670) by 'the raja of Kálu, whose estate is said to be in the Punjab'.[53] By the 1980s, the Himalayan ruler had assumed the role of founder of the original temple. The raja, it is said, commissioned the temple after an incredulous subject voiced doubts about Ayodhya's magnificence. The raja proved the sceptic wrong by ordering him to carry stones from the valley to the city, which were miraculously transformed into gems upon his return to the hills.[54] The prevalence of Ayodhya in Kullu lore and vice versa, peppered as it is with references to devotional Vaishnavism, suggests that *bairagi* sadhus connected with the mountain kingdom played a central part in their propagation.

The unsubstantiated nature of the folkloric evidence mentioned here notwithstanding, there is reason to believe that the link between Ayodhya and Kullu that is alluded to in the stories regarding Tretnath Mandir is not entirely fabricated. For, in addition to the preponderance of sadhus wandering between the Himalayas and the plains, Rajput rulers had harboured contacts with the city's religious establishments since at least the sixteenth century.[55] Considered in this light, the traditions pertaining to the temple of Tretnath afford significant insights into the interrelationship of Pahari Rajput, Mughal and Ramanandi politics. As noted earlier, West Himalayan involvement in the Mughal Empire peaked in the seventeenth century. Although high-ranking Mughal officers are known to have frequented (and even to have been stationed in) the lower hills, their presence in the remote valley of Kullu was inconsistent. Nevertheless, the *farman*s issued to Jagat Singh, the 'zamindar of Kullu', attest to close ties between Delhi and the raja. Described as 'accomplished in his royal ways', the Pahari ruler provided sapphires, precious stones and hawks to

[53] Bakker, *Ayodhyā*, Part I, p. 53, fn 3 (citing Carnegy, *Historical Sketch*, 1870, p. 21, which was unavailable at the time of writing). According to Bakker, Carnegy's appendix dates the temple's reconstruction to 1620, that is, even before it had been demolished. If this is correct, then Kullu's patronage of Ayodhya would have predated the arrival of Raghunath to the kingdom, suggesting the ties between Kullu and Ayodhya were already established (through the medium of Pindori?) prior to Galta's eighteenth-century reforms. Note that the first explicit mention of the temple as being that of Tretnath is nonetheless fairly late, dating to the mid-nineteenth century; *ibid.*, p. 145, fn 5.

[54] van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, pp. 15–16.

[55] A letter from a raja of Jodhpur that was found among the notebooks (*bahi*s) of an Ayodhya *panda* (priest catering to pilgrims) dated sambat 1622 (~1565 CE) attest to sustained links between Rajput rulers and Ayodhya priests; *ibid.*, p. 212. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Kullu tradition named the temple of 'Raghunath ji' in 'Oudh' (Ayodhya) as the final refuge of Raja Jai Singh, who reportedly spent his life there after failing to enlist military support in Lahore against his *bairagi*-supported rival, Tedhi Singh (see 'Warrior ascetics and Pahari state formation', above); see *Kullu and Saraj Gazetteer*, p. 80, and Lyall, *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement*, p. 112, for an earlier mention of Jai Singh's retiring to 'Oudh as a faqir' in the *vamshavali*.

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Shah Jahan's court.[56] The war of succession between the emperor's sons (1658–59) put these amicable ties to the test. Having sided with Dara Shikoh's losing party, the raja underwent a personal tragedy with the death of his eldest son and chosen successor, who had been sent to the plains to attend to the Mughal prince, in the final battles that brought Aurangzeb to power.[57] Examined in the context of Mughal politics, the motive for destroying Tretnath Temple becomes all too clear: in supporting the emperor's enemy, Jagat Singh would have been labelled an enemy of Delhi and the institutions associated with him—especially those in the more easily accessible plains—subject to the emperor's punitive wrath.[58]

While the lack of corroboration from epigraphic and/or documentary sources renders the veracity of Ayodhya oral tradition open to doubt, its agreement with recent studies on Mughal, ascetic and Rajput cultures strengthens its probability. As Heidi Pauwels' investigation and contextualisation of devotional Braj poetry in sixteenth-century Orchha shows, discourses of *bhakti* were closely linked to the assertion of a Rajput identity among 'regional military powerbrokers' during the era of Mughal consolidation. These served concrete military and political purposes: affiliation with *bhakti* saints provided aspiring rulers with access to a budding military market of *bhakta* followers, linked them with successful Rajput rulers (e.g., Man Singh Kacchvaha of Amer) and distanced them from anterior Shakta and Shaiva influences.[59] The agreement of these parameters with the Kullu case is important, for it hones and nuances the customary explanation of the contemporaneous rise of devotional religion in Pahari courts as a mere outcome of regional integration into the Mughal Empire.[60] Rather, devotional religion emerges as a key mediator in the relationships between Pahari rulers and Mughal nobles, exhibiting similar marks (the lack of written *bhakti* poetry from the West Himalayas notwithstanding) to those found in the inner (Bundela) and outer (Rajasthan) frontier zones. Thus, much like the bandit warlords of Bundelkhand, Pahari rulers sponsored temples and installed

[56] *MTK*, p. 86; *HPHS*, p. 461.

[57] The defeat of Dara Shikoh did, however, enable the raja to extend his rule to Sultanpur in the expansive lower part of the valley, whose zamindar was consequently stripped of the Mughal prince's protection. For a review of these documents and the concerns raised by the presence of Darah Shikoh's son in the hills c. 1658–60, see *MTK*, p. 86, *HPHS*, pp. 460–61.

[58] On the political dimension of temple demolition and desecration in early modern India, see Eaton, 'Temple Desecration in Indo-Muslim States', especially pp. 117–22. It is unclear whether Dara Shikoh's celebrated tolerance towards Hindu religions had a political–military dimension. His alliance with the rajas of Jaipur, the traditional patrons of the Galta Ramanandis, would suggest that this was the case, as do his reported conversations with 'Baba Lal' in Lahore, who despite being alternately described as a 'Nath' and a 'Bairagi', is also attributed with the founding of the Vaishnava (and important *bairagi* centre) *dvara* of Dhynapur; see Goswamy, 'The Vaishnava Establishment at Dhynapur', p. 157.

[59] Pauwels, 'The Saint, the Warlord, and the Emperor', p. 211, and p. 219, for the apparent targeting of soldier audiences in Braj *bhakti* poetry.

[60] This reasoning runs through the *HPHS*, reflecting its origin in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historiography, and is similarly sustained in more recent works, such as Goswamy, 'Religion and Art in the Punjab Hills', especially pp. 551–54.

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images associated with 'the blossoming bhakti movement' as 'part of a political project' that facilitated upward social mobility, and that was not lost upon their superiors in the Mughal nobility, intermittently their intermittent allies and their foes.[61]

Internal Divisions and the Transition to 'Caste' Status

The links between Kullu and Ayodhya, mediated as they were by *bairagi*s affiliated with Pindori and influenced by Mughal politics, touch upon the fundamental division between peripatetic (militarised or other) and sedentary (devotionalist temple officiate) ascetics. At the time of Jagat Singh's 'conversion', the distinctions between peripatetic *tyagi* (renunciant), itinerant *naga* (warrior) and sedentary *rasik* (temple dwelling) members of the Ramanandi *sampraday* were already present, and would mature into distinct categories with the reforms of the early eighteenth century. Although ostensibly united under the umbrella of a single *sampraday*, the competition for royal patronage between these groups often led to uneasy alliances and tensions within it, as evinced in the *MTK*'s detailed account of the conflict between the *bairagi* sadhu, Damodar Das, and the temple priest, Jodhavar.

Recall the affinities between the rivals. Both worship Raghunath, both use magic items associated with sadhus to attain their goals and both respect the decrees of Krishna Das Payohari and/or his Rajput patron. This suggests that the priest in question is not simply a Brahmin of unknown provenance, but one closely connected with his adversary and, most probably, a devotionalist temple dweller (*rasik*) of the same (Ramanandi) *sampraday*. The confrontation between the parties, which focuses on the loss of livelihood to be incurred by the priests should their deity be removed from Ayodhya, thus reflects competition over resources between different branches of Ramanandis belonging to or issuing from the Pindori lineage. That the impasse was only resolved with the raja's allocation of a portion of Raghunath's daily offerings to the Ayodhya priests and the engagement of Jodhavar (and his descendants) as officiates to the god in Kullu similarly agrees with the fundamental dynamics of sedentary and peripatetic sadhus' relations with external patrons.[62] The struggle between the ascetic and the priest in the *MTK* is thus best read as a reflection of tensions between peripatetic and sedentary members of the Ramanandi lineage of Galta-Pindori, which paralleled its expansion into the hills and northern India, and forged durable links between Kullu and Ayodhya in the process.

If, as I contended, the Ayodhya priests settled in Kullu were, in fact, Ramanandi *rasik*s (personified by Jodhavar in the *MTK*), who were introduced to the valley by peripatetic sadhus of the Pindori Dham (Damodar Das of the *MTK*), then the family of Raghunath's priests—which today simply passes for Brahmins who are indispensible for the ritual worship of the state's titular deity—would seem to have been

[61] Pauwels, 'The Saint, the Warlord, and the Emperor', p. 209.

[62] On sedentarisation among Ramanandis, see van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, pp. 107–82, especially pp. 126–30, for this process among *tyagi*s, the emblematic group of peripatetic Vaishnava ascetics.

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sedentarised to the extent of transforming into a caste. This process, arguably the most salient characteristic of Indian social history, is hardly novel and has indeed been witnessed throughout the subcontinent. Nevertheless, its occurrence in Kullu merits special consideration, for it points to the remarkable resilience of the social, political and religious traditions of the valley in face of an external group that possessed marked advantages in terms of technology, economy, privileged access to political powers beyond the hills and that formed an important part of the socio-political order in the subcontinent. The chief reason for this is probably the reduced scale and complexity of Kullu society, where village communities exercise political power through the joint worship of governing deities that help sustain their cohesion and would have consequently impeded the *bhakti* message of egalitarianism and caste defiance from taking root among underprivileged members of its society, who remained firmly bound to local religious practice.[63] As such, it strengthens the claim that devotional religion in the Pahari regions was primarily linked with the elite and closely related to military and political manoeuvrings on a larger (north Indian) scale.

What, then, became of the *bairagi*s who thronged to Kullu with the adoption of devotional Vaishnavism as a state religion by Jagat Singh? With the exception of Jodhavar's progeny, whose ritual occupation accorded them the status of Brahmins, the descendants of the ascetics who had settled in the valley ultimately transformed into a minority (in British Indian parlance, a 'miscellaneous') caste, whose members had, by the 1860s, abandoned their erstwhile 'religious pretensions' to become 'quite secular people, cultivating their farms with their own hands like other peasants'.[64] The links between the descendants of the sadhus who had, at various historical junctures, helped sustain the rule of Kullu rajas are aptly preserved in popular memory. Thus, a jocular account current among the valley's *bairagi*s tells of their origin in a group of 300 wandering sadhus, who were greeted by the raja upon arriving in the valley in the distant past. The raja generously offered to take care of their every need, but having misheard their demand for 'wood' (*lakri*) which was needed to maintain the ascetics' sacred fire (*dhuni*) as 'girl' (*larki*), he quickly arranged for 300 local women to accompany the sadhus, thereby sowing the seeds of today's *bairagi* caste.[65]

[63] An analysis of the acculturative processes and mechanisms that led to Ramanandi immersion in Kullu is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to note that in 1868, the population of the valley of Kullu proper numbered a mere 12,496 that was divided between high 'Kanet' (today Khas) and low 'Dagi' castes, with Brahmins and Rajputs hardly differing 'in appearance, dress or customs from the Kanets' and the *bairagi* 'caste' forming a minute external minority (less than 72 of a total of 5,991 households in Kullu and Plach); Lyall, *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement*, pp. 146, 149–52, quotation from p. 151. For a study of the political aspects of Khas religion consult Sutherland, 'Traveling Gods and Government by Deity'.

[64] Lyall, *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement*, pp. 152–53.

[65] Personal communication, James Mallinson. It is worth noting that in 1860s Kullu, the *bairagi*s were widely recognised as descending from intermarriages between the foreign sadhus who originally

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Conclusion

The foregoing historical survey has shown how the Ramanandi lineage of Galta was established in Kullu through the *guru-parampara* of the Punjabi seat of Pindori. By reading the local account of Raghunath's arrival to the kingdom in 1661 against contemporaneous developments in the *sampraday*, several distinct phases emerged, highlighting the links between the anterior world of Shaiva and Shakta ascetics with that of Vaishnavas. It has been shown that the initial contacts between the rajas of Kullu and the Ramanandis may have originated in military service at around 1500, and that this may have helped cement an aspiring dynasty's rule over the valley. The early phase of Ramanandi involvement in Kullu thus reflects something of the nebulous formation of the *sampraday*—and its military wing in particular—through the peculiar vantage point of Himalayan kingdoms. Similarly, the adoption of Raghunath as state deity has been shown to be the culmination of lengthy processes, rather than the outcome of a single event of monumental significance that is reported in local tradition.[66]

Further enquiries situated the *sampraday*'s multiple centres of authority (Galta, Pindori, Ayodhya) and divergent components (peripatetic sadhus, itinerant warrior monks, sedentary temple dwellers) in a comprehensible framework that advances plausible explanations for their appearance in different parts of the local account of Kullu history. The bifurcations within the *sampraday* and their relation to political powers—Rajput, Pahari, Awadhi and Mughal—highlight the urgency of accounting for the role of devotionalist movements as catalysts of political change in early modern South Asia. This calls for further enquiry into the combination of sedentary and mobile segments of these movements and their impact on state (imperial, regional, local) structures, the traditional objects of historical research. This, in turn, raised questions regarding the historical reality behind the 'conversion' of Jagat Singh and the reasons behind devotional Vaishnavism's failure to amass a durable body of followers in Kullu. Religious change in the West Himalayan setting, it has been noted, was hampered by the trenchant hold of local political–religious institutions, limiting conversion to *rambhakti* to the elite. Gauged according to Richard Eaton's three-phased heuristic model of inclusion, identification and displacement, devotional Vaishnavism in Kullu seems to have reached its apex with identification, the concluding phase of displacement having occurred at the level of head of state alone.[67] The limited spread of *bhakti* in the hills thus underscores

entered the kingdom and their Brahmin and Kanet followers; Lyall, *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement*, pp. 146, 153.

[66] In this respect, the account of the Kullu raja's 'conversion' is concordant with regional modes of historical narration, such as the alleged 'overnight militarization' of the Sikh Khalsa; see note 13, above.

[67] Eaton, *The Rise of Islam on the Bengal Frontier*, pp. 268–303. For a good example of the king's need to account for the will of village communities (through their deities), see Berti, 'Kings, Gods and Political Leaders', pp. 131–33.

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the importance of its political dimension in frontier regions, where the lack of popular appeal dictated it disseminate 'from the top', inverting the habitual mode of its diffusion in the plains. The particular characteristics of the spread of early modern devotional Vaishnavism into Kullu notwithstanding, this exercise ultimately illustrates how close readings of regional traditions can be fruitfully used to situate wide historical phenomena in discrete locales in the subcontinent, and how these, in turn, reflect upon the latter. As such, it contributes to the ongoing examination of the intricate processes that link centre and periphery in the social, religious and political history of South Asia.

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