

Mohras and Metal Idols: Expressions of Communal Devotion and Identity in Himachal Pradesh's Temple Traditions

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Abstract

This paper will discuss mohras (metal face-installations or mukhote) and metal idols as crucial manifestations of group worship and belonging in the Himachal Pradesh temple traditions. These sacred metal forms are not considered to be the symbolic depictions per se but rather the living embodiments of local deities (devtas and devis) who are in charge of social, moral, and ecological life. These forms are based on the fact that the region is called Dev Bhoomi (Land of Gods). Using the historical, ritualistic and art-historical insights, the paper will follow the development of mohras since the early medieval metalworking traditions, which were supported by the royalty, up to the modern days when they are used in processions, festivals, and oracles. It points to the difference between mobile mohras and permanently installed metal idols and how movement, interaction and communal participation determine Himalayan religiosity. The regional differences between Chamba, Kullu, Mandi and Kinnaur give rise to the local aesthetics, syncretism effects as well as the strong sense of territory. The paper also examines how hereditary communities of artisans help preserve these traditions as well as the modernization challenge. In general, the paper proposes that mohras and metal idols are vibrant cultural actors that incorporate devotion, governance, environmental stewardship, and shared memory, which are the keys to the lived religious experience of Himachal Pradesh.

Keywords

Mohras, Metal Idols, Himachal Pradesh, Devta System, Communal Devotion, Temple Traditions, Himalayan Culture

Introduction

The traditions of temples are extremely crucial in the communal life, collective memory and regional identity of the Himachal Pradesh, and mohras (metal face-plaques or mukhote) and metal idols are some of the most potent representations of collective devotion. These are my sacred representations of bronze or silver, usually centuries old, and which are not just ritual objects, but are considered to be a living embodiment of local god/gods within the village communities. Strongly based on folk tradition, they bear the mark of syncretism of the Himalayan religiosity, in which Shaivism and Shaktism, Vaishnavism and the native animistic religions live and collaborate. In contrast to the uniform iconography of classical temple art, Mohras and metal idols are very local and often connected with village devtas and devis as protectors, moral and dispensers of social order. The most common of these movable sacred forms were used in jatras (processions), seasonal festivals, oracular rituals, and community councils and strengthened the close relationship between religion and daily social governance. Situated in areas like Chamba, Kullu, Mandi, and Kinnaur, they are made using the complex repousse and metalwork skills of several generations of traditional craftsmen, which speak of the persistence of traditional knowledge systems. Traditionally supported by local rulers as early as the 6th century AD, these traditions also demonstrate the mechanisms of cultural change such as Sanskritization when the local gods were subsequently equated with pan-Indian deities such as Shiva or Durga. The temple practices in Himachal Pradesh are based on the conviction of collective ancestry, territorial identification, and a deep sense of organizational identity through the collective worship and involvement in rituals in the form of mohras and metal idolatry.

History and Evolution

The Himachal Pradesh has mojras (metal face-plaques) and metal idols that are sacred images of native deities, mostly Shiva and Durga, and that are firmly ingrained into the cultural ethos of Dev Bhoomi (Land of Gods). These metal masks are not simply artistic designs, rather they are thought to reflect the living presence of the deity which is the visible and ritual face of which divine power is reached. At the core of the temple processions (jatras), seasonal celebrations, and joint prayers, mohras are the moving sacred symbols with the help of which the god could travel between followers. They are directly connected with community and ancestral deities (devtas and devis), and that social structure where religion, government, agriculture, and daily life cannot be separated. Here, worship does not consist of going to temples but it is a dynamic and collective process that strengthens the sense of collective identity, territorial belonging, and moral order.

Historical Origins

The craft of advanced metalworking and mohras production could be tracked in Himachal Pradesh as early as the 6th-7th century CE and thrived with the support of the

royalty. The so-called himachali courts An active patronage of craftsmen specialized in metalware and designed to sharpen religious imagery was supported in particular the himachali courts of areas like Chamba. Kashmiri artisans had a major impact particularly in Chamba where the bronze casting and image-making techniques were appropriated and localized. The craft itself is older, but the first surviving metal plaques with a certain date are of the 10th -11th century CE, with some of the most significant examples being of Kullu dated to around 1025 CE. The art style would develop through time as a cultural blend of the native tribalism, Shaivite traditions, subsequent Sanskritization of Hindu iconography and even Buddhist influences due to the religious interactions in the region.

Evolution and Development

The development of mohras is a shift to a more stylized and symbolic metal mask in high-relief sculptural representations which were determined by the aesthetics of the region. The 14th-15th centuries saw the emergence of detailed metal plates with the image of crowned gods and goddesses with calm and smiling faces. The Kashmiri influence in Chamba created finer forms, less harsh tonal finishes and more ornate crown work, usually of a Vishnu or Lakshmi Narayan. Kullu in contrast evolved an ambitious, expressive style which was typified by exaggerated features and wide eyes and images of local deities of power like the Hadimba Devi and Jamlu Devta. The extensive use of the repousse method also changed the art of temples where the very rich metal doors and panels at temples such as Bhimakali (Sarhan) and Chandika Devi (Kinnaur) were made. Although the practice of using ritual remains in the modern world, the craft is threatened by modernization and adaptation has been made to this by producing miniature mohras to be used as decorative items and souvenirs, which both indicate consistency and change. What are Mohras and Metal Idols?

Mohras (Metal Masks)

Mohras are centuries-old embossed or cast metal face-plaques (mukhote) which depict the images of gods. Mohras are usually 20 cm to 30 cm high, most usually attributed to Shiva, Durga (Devi) and an assortment of village (devtas and devis) gods. They are made of brass, copper, silver, or Ashtadhatu which is an alloy of eight metals that are believed to be ritually pure and spiritually powerful. Mohras are worn not on the face, as theatrical masks are, but symbolically as the living presence of the god, the face. The presence of the divine is said to be temporary during rituals and processions when it is in the mohra and the deity is therefore in direct contact with the community.



Metal Idols

The idols made out of metal are instead bigger, full-bodied anthropomorphic portrayals of deities. These idols are usually of Ashtadhatu and are permanently placed inside the garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum) of temples. After being ritually sanctified, they are seldom transferred, because their permanence is the very image of a presence, the constant presence of the god within the sanctuary. Whereas mohras are portable and exposed, metal idols symbolize permanence, continuity and cosmic order in the temple architecture.



Significance of Mohras

According to the traditions of Himachali thought, it is inauspicious to remove a central idol of a sanctuary of worship. Mohras are thus complete replacements of their gods, which allow the god to move about during festivals, fairs and processions between villages without breaking the ritual standards. They are also placed as votive offerings by families to celebrate major life events like the death of a family member or in search of blessings of prosperity, good harvests, fertility, health and defense against disease or natural disasters. Such actions make Mohras very personal but at the same time have a collective meaning, a connection between personal faith and group worship.

Temple Traditions of Himachal Pradesh: Dev Bhoomi, Deities, and Community Life

The temple tradition of Himachal Pradesh, which is highly venerated as the Dev Bhoomi or the Land of Gods, is deeply rooted in the animistic belief, Shaivism and Shaktism and the local folklore. They are not as a rule places of worship as most other parts of India but central institutions which control social, cultural, and even judicial life in Himachal Pradesh. The local deities are not merely the figurative figures; the deities are considered to be the living beings who guard and control the order of the morality, social and territorial environment of the villages. It is a close association between the divinity and the community that is maintained by unique architecture, common craftsmanship, and exuberant rituals that are indicative of the mountainous landscape of the region and its historical seclusion.

The Devta–Devi Cult

The main tradition of Himachali temples is the cult of Devta and Devi, according to which the local deities and goddesses are thought to govern certain areas. These gods and goddesses are seen as guardians, adjudicators, and ethical counselors and can solve conflicts and offer direction as to agriculture, migration and social behavior. Divine power is incorporated in the day-to-day administration through oracles and consultation of rituals, which strengthen the community and conviction structures.

Unique Architectural Traditions

Himachal Pradesh Temple architecture has been geographically and climatically adapted to suit the Himalayan area. These pagoda-shaped temples include tiered roofs that are meant to support heavy snow and earthquakes as was the case in the Manu Temple in Manali. Combined with this, the classical Nagara style and the local Pahari or mountain style, incorporate stone masons with highly sculpted wood. There are sloping-roofed wooden temples, with a balcony and carved doorways, which represent both the religious use and the use in the environment.

Wood Carving and Communal Craftsmanship

The building of the temple is customarily a community-based activity that is done by the whole village. Talented craftsmen will also add detailed carvings on wood in the form of gods, mythological images, and nature. The artistic and ritual continuity is evident in the fact that icons made of brass and metal back in the 8th century are still actively worshipped in such parts of the world as Chamba. These temples are not only a storehouse of spiritual but also an artistic heritage.

Rituals, Festivals, and Regional Diversity

The rituals in the Himachali temples are colorful which include traditional music, ceremonial dances and seasonal festivals like the Raulani festival. These rituals focus on balance among human beings, gods and nature. Local differences also add to these traditions: Chamba is recognized by its temples of the early medieval periods (7th -11th centuries), and the Kullu Valley is known for its great Dussehra festival where hundreds of village gods gather in a spectacular show of community worship.

Expressions of Communal Devotion, Identity, and Craft in Himachal Pradesh's Mohra Traditions

The religious structure of mohras and metal idols in Himachal Pradesh produces a unique religious system commonly referred to as the Devta system, which is the system that unites whole communities through a single faith, communal action, and social accountability. This system is more of a mobility, interaction and direct involvement with gods in daily life in contrast with centralized or temple-based worship, and thus devotion is a lived and communal experience and not an act of faith.

Expressions of Communal Devotion

Processions and Festivals (Jatras): One of the most obvious manifestations of the communal piety is observed in the form of festivals and jatras, including the internationally famous Kullu Dussehra and various local melas. In such occasions, mohras are ritually installed over wooden palanquins (rathas) and profusely decorated with silver ornaments, silk fabrics, garlands and symbolic weapons. These palanquins are carried together by

devotees in villages, fields, and sacred routes making worship a participatory activity of the people. The procession itself is a mobile shrine, which strengthens unity and religious collectiveness.

Active Involvement of the Deity: In the belief of the Himachali, the deity is not remote or locked up in a sanctum. The devta represented by the mohra is assumed to walk, dance, and communicate with devotees during processions. The swaying of the palanquin, which is accompanied by traditional musical instruments like drums, karnaal and narsingha, is associated with divine presence and acceptance. The divine presence in the village is shared by attendants, priests, musicians, and the villagers, which is highly important and reinforces the notion that the deity is a part of the community.

Divine Intervention and Social Cohesion: One of the important characteristics of this type of devotionism is the presence of the Gur (oracle-priest), an agent of communication with God. In the rituals, the Gur goes into a trance, and passes the message of the deity regarding issues of health and agricultural cycles to conflicts and ethical behavior. The judgments rendered by the deity have great powers usually influencing social and business operations in the village. This interdependence in Godly advice, brings about confidence, shared responsibility, and a feeling of collective identity, which in essence is a kind of social government.

Environmental Stewardship: Local deities are also considered the upholding guardians of the natural landscape. The religious faith preserves sacred groves (Dev Vans), forested areas, water bodies, and grazing areas of these deities. The exploitation of these areas is considered as an offence to the devta, where spiritual devotion is directly associated with saving the environment. By this belief system, the environmental stewardship is a collective religious obligation.

Expressions of Identity and Cultural Heritage

Local Diversity in Craft: Mohras indicate powerful regional identities by dissimilar artistic styles. Chamba mohras are characterized by elaborate ornamentation, gentle gestures and classical iconography, frequently of Vishnu or Lakshmi Narayan. By contrast, the bold and expressive styles of the Kullu and Mandi areas feature large and wide-set eyes and stylized features, symbolizing the local mighty deities like Hadimba Devi or Jamlu Devta. Such differences visualize regional histories and ideologies.

Oral Tradition and History: This is believed to have happened when many gods appeared when a lost mohra was found by a villager buried, or lost. Such myths of origin are preserved by oral tradition, tale-telling and performance of rites to connect modern worshippers with ancestral memory and sacred space. The continuity of different generations and cultural identity becomes stronger because of such narratives.

Dynastic Connections and Syncretism: There are inscriptions on mohras dated between the 15th and 18 th century which indicate royal sponsorship, hence showing the historical ties between the local kings and the deities of the villages. Mohras in the border areas of Kinnaur, Lahaul and Spiti show a combination of Hindu and Buddhist designs, which depict centuries of cultural mixing and syncretism that characterize the area.

Craftsmanship Artistic and Traditional

The art of mohras is a unique hereditary trade carried by only the Thathar and Sunar caste communities of artisans. Artisans apply both metallurgical craft and knowledge of ritual using the ancient lost-wax technique of casting. Gold, silver, bronze and brass are metals that are selected due to their longevity and purity symbolism. Regardless of the contemporary times, this tradition is still alive, and miniature mohras can now be used as cultural souvenirs.

Regional Variations in Himachali Metal Traditions

Region	Dominant Deities	Stylistic Features and Characteristics
Kullu	Jamlu Devta, Hadimba Devi	Bold forms, wide eyes, exaggerated features; strong ritual mobility
Chamba	Shiva, Lakshmi Narayan	Refined detailing, soft expressions, Kashmiri bronze influence
Mandi	Local Devtas and Devis	Blend of royal patronage and folk art; inscriptions are common
Kinnaur	Local Devis	Hindu–Tibetan syncretism; use of semi-precious stones

These regional styles visually encode local histories, political patronage, and cultural interactions, reinforcing strong territorial identities within Himachal Pradesh.

Conclusion

In the end, the study concludes that the central to the religious and cultural life in Himachal Pradesh are the mohras and metal idols which serve as living symbols upon which communities negotiate, experience and maintain their connection with the divine. These sacred metal forms embodied, besides their artistic and ritual associations, a rather Himalayan vision of the world where religion, government, ecology, and social order mingle with each other. Mobility in processions, oracular activities, and festivals facilitates the involvement of local deities in the life of the village, which reinforces the collective identity, moral authority and environmental responsibility. Meanwhile, the local differences in style, iconography and craftsmanship are indicative of historical patronage, syncretism and localized belief systems. In spite of the modernity, the fact that Mohras and metal idols

remain relevant in the ritual life of people guarantees the immortality of the practice in the shaping of communal devotion and continuity of cultural practices in Himachal Pradesh.

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