

Seer and the Scene

Ellen Reitman







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In appreciation and with thanks to:

Swami Shyam who has opened my vision by telling me to close my eyes and who, by example, symbolises that Seer, Seeing, and the Scene are ONE.

Jonty Hayes for making my writing read far better than it is.

Seymour and my mother for their constant enthusiasm and encouragement.

All those whom I have met in this fabulous Valley of Gods.

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“... when open, the eyes of a human being see the forms but never know that forms appeared through the eyes ...”

Swami Shyam

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Introduction

In the Foothills of the Western Himalayas

The Himalayas are the youngest major mountain range in the world, but also home to some of the most ancient human traditions. You can look around and see valleys, both wide and narrow, snow-clad peaks, exotic lakes, gushing rivers and streams, bare rock and abundant forests and green hills. However, you can also look upon these mighty mountains, as the Himalayan people and their neighbours have for thousands of years, with awe and reverence. If you look with their eyes, you can see the abode of the gods.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the Kullu valley, which has been my home since 1980. The town of Kullu, where I live, sits at 4,000 feet (1,220 metres) above sea level in the Western Himalayas nestled on the banks of the Vyaas river. Like a sculptor, this river has carved out the Kullu valley—the Valley of Gods.

To the west side, the Sarvari river leads to the steeper, more mystical Lug valley, part of the Bara Bhangal mountains of the Dhauladhar (literally white mountain) range of the Lesser Himalayas. East of Kullu lies the Kothi Kharal mountain ridge, which is known for its village shrines and particularly the temple to Bijli Mahadev on its summit. On the other side of this ridge, we find the Manikaran valley. Its river, the Parvati, joins the Vyaas at Bhuntar. While to the north is the town of Manali and beyond that the snow-covered Pir Panjal range, which can be crossed via the 13,500-foot Rohtang pass into the Lahaul and Spiti valleys. From here we reach the Greater Himalayas, which have an average elevation of over 20,000 feet and run all the way to Mount Everest.

The Vyaas river is one of the five (*pañj*) rivers (*ab*) that give the Punjab its name. It derives its name from the revered sage Vyaas (also sometimes called Veda Vyaas, the one who classified the Vedas). He was the author of the epic Mahabharata, as well as featuring as an important character in it.

Vyaas fathers the princes Dhritarashtra and Pandu, whose children are known as the Kauravs and the Pandavs. Dhritarashtra's son Duryodhan, one of the

Kauravs, ends up waging war against the eldest Pandav, Yudhishtir, for the right to rule the kingdom. During that great war, on the fields at Kurukshetra, Krishna gives Arjun the teachings known as the Bhagavad Gita—the most sacred of Hindu scriptures.

Besides the Mahabharata and the Gita, the great sage Vyaas is also considered to be the scribe of both the Vedas and Puranas, as well as, according to Hindu beliefs, being an avatar of the god Vishnu.

Lord Vishnu is one of the Hindu trinity. He is the sustainer of the Universe, while Brahma is its creator and Mahesh (Shiva) the dissolver. And in the Valley of Gods, all three exist in a unique and fascinating manner. The forms of the supreme deities depicted here are unusual, and their like is to be found nowhere else in India.

Brahma has an outstanding temple in Khokhan, one of only a few places of worship dedicated to him in all of the subcontinent. Often portrayed with four arms, Vishnu is characterized very differently here in the form of Triyogi Narayan and has a fascinating temple in his name at Diyar. And it was in these mountains that Shiva, the great god of destruction, sat deeply meditating until conquered by Parvati's love for him. Understandably, temples to the divine couple, Shiva and Parvati, are prevalent in these mountains.

Along with the temples to these three principal gods are shrines to numerous other devtas, deities, but all of them are constructed in four broad styles: pagoda (tiered and wooden); shikhar (Sanskrit for mountain peak, but designating a stone-built tower); pahari (the most popular mountain temple, with a gabled pent roof); and tower (tall and timber bonded).

Every place of worship has fascinating legends attached to it, each uniquely described by devotees. Exploring the villages and the legends associated with them has become a passion for me. The faith and belief in God is very apparent here. And trying to capture it is a remarkable challenge.

I studied photography in the 1970s, long before the digital era, and first came to the Himalayas in 1980 with two cameras: a 35 mm Nikon SLR; and a large format 4x5" Speed Graphic (the type of camera where you get under a cloth to see the image projected on ground glass, extend the bellows to focus and pull out the slate to expose the sheet of film).

I soon realized that the larger format camera was too cumbersome to capture the 360-degree movement that surrounded me. It was not suited to the interests that had become my focus. No doubt, the static structure of the temples and the sun's rays rising over the landscapes—both ideal for large format photography—interested me, but I was absolutely entranced by the spontaneity of every aspect of this wonderful new place. A shepherd could be tending his animals, keeping track of the newborn lambs, while traffic attempted to weave in and out of the ever-moving flock. At the same time, on the same road, a devta would be approaching from the opposite direction, with devotees coming on to the road to receive the god's blessings. To see these scenes in a blink of the eye was all part of the experience. And this has continued even to this day. Each moment has been compelling, each greater than the last. The scenes have changed, but the excitement, the light with which I am seeing, the Seer, has thrived.

Light, what a fascinating, mysterious phenomenon. Light is everywhere. Physically we need it to see scenes as it carries images to our eyes and brains. Seeing colours and shapes is second nature to us, yet light is purely and simply a subtle energy. We see light in relation to darkness, highlight in relation to shadow. In fact, darkness is just another colour of light, yet we mistakenly think of darkness as absorption of light.

Modern cameras evolved from the camera obscura, which was a device consisting of a box with a hole in one side. Leonardo da Vinci published the first clear description of the camera obscura in the early 1500s:

If the facade of a building, or a place, or a landscape is illuminated by the sun and a small hole is drilled in the wall of a room in a building facing this, which is not directly lighted by the sun, then all objects illuminated by the sun will send their images through this aperture and will appear, upside down, on the wall facing the hole.

You will catch these pictures on a piece of white paper, which placed vertically in the room not far from that opening, and you will see all the above-mentioned objects on this paper in their natural shapes or colours, but they will appear smaller and upside down, on account of crossing of the rays at that aperture. If these pictures originate from a place which is illuminated by the sun, they will appear coloured on the paper exactly as they are. The paper should be very thin and must be viewed from the back.*

* Josef Maria Eder, *History of Photography*, trans. Edward Epstean (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945)

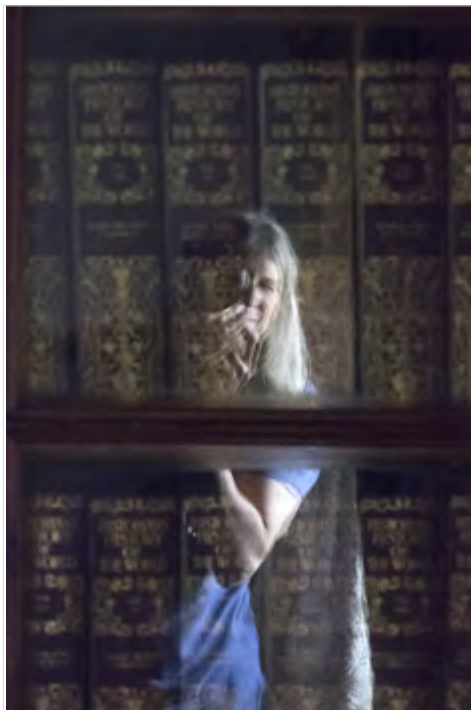


In exactly the same way, a camera takes the reflected scene's light, but uses a lens to register light on the silver halide emulsion or film (or now on to a sensor). A series of mirrors (a mechanical system used in SLR cameras) project the image the right way up. Click, and, *voilà*, a photo is born.

The same is true of anything that is seen by the eyes and mind of man. A human being (the camera) sees through his eyes (the lens) taking in light reflected off the mountain scene in front of him. When all the information contained in this reflected light reaches his brain and is processed, lo and behold, he 'sees' the mountain.

But who is instrumental in getting the mountain into the camera? The camera, the mechanism, is certainly fundamental, but how *does* the mountain get inside? Without the one to make the camera work, there is no possibility of the scene reaching the film. In the same way, without the one who opens the eyes, who uses the body as his mechanism, no mountain can be experienced. Without the Seer, no scene can be seen.

My life in the Kullu valley has led me to many locations and certainly many enquiries. Photography is usually all about what we can see, and, subsequently, how to illustrate the conception or perception of the scene. But here it is all about what we can't see, it is all about the Seer seeing the scene.





God & Man





God & Man

Over the generations, many peoples of varied cultural and religious backgrounds have settled in the Himalayan foothills. Unsurprisingly, especially given the relative isolation of these areas, each district or kingdom developed its own dialects and practices, but there is also a common thread running through them all. This thread has become known as the *Pahari* tradition. The name Pahari derives from *pahar* meaning ‘hill,’ referring to the foothills, and can refer to the people, language(s), and culture.

The vast majority of the population of Himachal Pradesh would consider themselves Paharis. And although Hindi is the official state language, most hill people speak a form of Pahari, which is constituted of many dialects—for example, Chambeali and Churahi are spoken in the district of Chamba, Mandeali in Mandi, and Kulvi (or Kului) in Kullu. All of these dialects trace their origin to the Sanskrit language, the source of almost all the languages of northern India.

Along with the variety of dialects, comes a diversity of divine traditions, each unique to its own village. The people who settled here in the hills organized themselves into village communities set up under the authority of a *gram devta*, or village god.

In the villages, the mode of worship and the rituals are unique. Rather than being represented by statues fixed in the temples, the devtas are moving beings and are carried around on a palanquin, a *rath* in the local language. (The devtas do usually have their own temples, but in most cases no idols are placed in them.)

These raths are decorated with *mohras*, which are metallic masks of gold, silver, or *ashtadhatu* (an alloy of gold, silver, copper, zinc, lead, tin, iron, and mercury). These beautiful mohras are fixed with bolts of cloth on to an underlying wooden structure. Then the whole ensemble is garlanded with beautifully coloured silk and satin cloths. Flowers and other locally grown plants such as barley grass further adorn the rath.



An older style kardu rath

This structure is then mounted on wooden poles, which are often sheathed in beaten silver, and is carried on the shoulders of men associated with the devta. Generally, it is carried by a pair of men, but, occasionally, one might encounter an older style *kardu rath*, which is carried upon the head of a single individual.

As the centuries pass, this kardu style has become less common, but it has an ancient heritage in the story of the legendary sage Jamdagni Rishi.

The sage was returning to his hermitage at Malana after a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. On his head, he carried a basket filled with eighteen images of different gods. In Kullu, this basket is called a kardu. Crossing the Chanderkhaani Pass, he was caught in a fierce storm. As he struggled to stay on his feet, the basket was thrown from the sage's head, and the images were scattered far and wide.

The hill people found these images, which miraculously took shape as gods and they began to worship them. It is said that until this time the gods had not assumed forms, thus, legend has it, idol worship originated in the Kullu Valley. And the kardu rath recalls this origin.





After receiving blessings from Lord Raghunath (Ram), devtas Takarassi Nag and Kuddhial, along with members of the haar, rejoice singing and dancing in the name of their god



Whatever kind of rath is used to carry the god, it is assembled and decorated perhaps only six times a year. These are special occasions, namely, fairs and ceremonies dedicated to the devta or, such as Dussehra, in which the god participates.

The rath is accompanied by a large collection of people: the *kardhar*, the caretaker of the god, who has overall responsibility for the occasion and assembling the rath; the *pujari*, or priest, who performs *puja* (worship) daily; the *gur*, or oracle of the god; the *bajantaris*, the devta's band of musicians; and the *nashandars*, who carry various divine artefacts. Together, they are poetically called the *haar* of the devta, his garland.

At these great celebrations, it is the music and dancing that immediately captures one's attention. The instruments associated with the devtas—drums, shehnai, and larger brass horns—begin to play. An unusual music: tribal, with a striking rhythm, maybe a little offbeat. And then the mountain men put their arms on each other's shoulders, form a semicircle around the devta, and begin to dance. The dance is deliberate, calm, joyous. All the men seem to know the steps. Though their feet and arms move, their attention is somewhere else, in another realm. They look almost bodiless. For the hill people, dance is the privilege of God.



Palanquin of Panreer devta on the shoulders of a member of the haar





At the Sharhi fair in Naggar typical folk dancing honouring the devtas is a feature.
Festivals provide the time and place for tales and legends of the devtas to be recounted



Horns of Chavan Rishi





Gurs of Tripura Sundari and Shayshnag at the Sharhi fair in Naggar



The thumb-sized idol of Raghunath placed on a flower-adorned throne

Kullu Dussehra

The festival of Dussehra is widely celebrated across India, but in the Kullu valley it has taken on a different form. In part, this is because, in the seventeenth century, Raja Jagat Singh combined the worship of Lord Ram, the hero of Dussehra, with the existing practice of each village venerating its own god or *devta*. The story of how this came to pass is fascinating and was related to me by the present king of Kullu, Raja Maheshwar Singh, descendant of Jagat Singh.

Raja Jagat Singh ruled over the prosperous and beautiful kingdom of Kullu. As the ruler, the *raja* came to know of a peasant by the name of Durgadatta who apparently possessed many beautiful pearls. The raja thought he should have these treasured pearls, even though the only pearls Durgadatta had were pearls of knowledge. The raja, in his greed, ordered Durgadatta to hand over his pearls or be hanged. Foreseeing his inevitable fate at the hands of the raja, Durgadatta threw himself on a fire and cursed the king with the words: 'Whenever you sit to eat, your rice will turn to worms and your water will turn to blood.'

The accursed raja sought solace and searched out advice from a *brahmin* (priest). The holy man told him that in order to eradicate the curse, he must secure the idol of Raghunath from Ayodhya, the birthplace of Ram. Desperate, the king sent a brahmin down to the Plains, where he stole the idol and set out on his journey back to Kullu.

The people of Ayodhya, finding their beloved Raghunath-ji missing, set out in search of the Kullu brahmin. They found him on the banks of the Sarayu river and asked why he had taken Raghunath-ji. In reply, the brahmin recounted the story of Raja Jagat Singh.

Nevertheless, the people of Ayodhya reclaimed Raghunath and attempted to return him to his home, but their tiny idol became incredibly heavy when headed back towards Ayodhya and became

very light when they turned towards the Himalayas. This persuaded them that Raghunath's wish was to leave for Kullu.

On reaching the mountains, Raghunath was installed as the reigning deity of the Kullu kingdom. After installing the idol, Raja Jagat Singh drank the *charanamrit*, the water used to bathe Raghunath, and the curse was lifted. Jagat Singh became Lord Raghunath's regent.



The rath of Adi Brahma carried down from Sultanpur to the Dussehra maidan

And the Kullu Dussehra has continued since those days of Raja Jagat Singh. Unlike Dussehra festivals on the Gangetic plain, Kullu Dussehra does not enact the scenes of the Ramayan in a traditional manner. It is uniquely celebrated here in the Valley of Gods. The raja invites hundreds of gods and goddesses from the valley to perform a *yagya*, or religious ceremony, in Raghunath's honour. It is a beautifully rich amalgam of history, culture, and customs.

The thumb-sized idol of Raghunath is placed on a flower-adorned, colourfully draped throne, and, while onlookers shout out '*Jai Siya Ram!*' (Victory to Sita's Ram!), the pundits carry him down through the ancient pathways of Kullu to the grassy maidan.

Once they reach the upper maidan, many devtas join in the celebration and begin to take their historical positions around the main *rath* (chariot). The procession to the lower maidan cannot start until the goddess Hadimba Mata arrives and her *gur* (oracle) performs. Shouting out in a language that is unfamiliar to most onlookers, Hadimba's *gur* tells people they must be faithful to their goddess.

After the priests have offered prayers, the descendants of Raja Jagat Singh circle the rath several times. With the drums beating and the blowing of serpent-like horns, you can feel the crowd's anticipation and deep faith. The excitement mounts as tens of thousands watch in awe as thick hemp ropes are laid out to pull the rath. For those pulling the heavy wooden chariot, it is an auspicious, sacred duty that brings good fortune.

Hundreds of men pick up the ropes and begin to heave the rath and Lord Raghunath to the far corner of the lower maidan. Waves of people and devtas dance in excitement. *Nag*, or serpent, deities zigzag their way through the crowds with great fervour. And the thousands of villagers fall into the wake of the chariot.

Raghunath is placed in his interim *mandir* (temple) and the devtas take turns to enter and bow down to him. Colourfully energized, the devtas move to and fro from Lord Raghunath to his regent, the king, who, along with his entourage, receives the excited gods. Having received the royal touch, the god is calmed down and then goes about greeting other devtas. The ceremony appears to open the doors of heaven and allow the gods to come down on earth to rejoice in their own glory.



Hadimba Mata and her gur (oracle) in trance, instilling faith in her devotees



Thousands join, pulling the rath of Lord Raghunath to the far corner of the lower maidan



Devatas energetically bow to each other as a form of greeting



The relation of God and Man





Raja Maheshwar Singh honoured by gods from Inner Seraj at the Dussehra festival

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The nature of the people's faith may be abstract, however, the practice can be very concrete. Rules, do's and don'ts, become important, and, whether it is in a family, village, or town like Kullu, a system of hierarchy manifests.

Dussehra is an example of the traditions that are passed down through generations, mostly by word of mouth. Stories, such as that of Raja Jagat Singh's, are repeatedly heard, and in that repetition life's lessons are learnt.

Young children can be fearless, but lack experience, which often results in foolish behaviour. Elders have the wisdom of a lifetime of experience, but at a price, since their life experiences transform their once-held fearlessness into fear. And so, through experience and fear, man has developed. In this valley, Dussehra has for hundreds of years played its part in this development.

The hierarchy is clear—with the devtas, Lord Raghunath and his regent at the top—but beyond that it is the faith in the devta that is the true light seen in people's eyes. And it is this faith in what may look like inanimate forms that underpins all of Kullu life. Just as a sculptor sees the statue in a block of stone, so the hill people know God in the silver and gold masks of their devtas.



The gur and palanquin of Balu Nag at Dussehra







Gurs of Gohri Deo dance with their traditional iron implements. The gantha (bell) and darach (vessel in which herbs are burnt) are the pure representation of the god. The rath (left) is Pirdi Mahadev. Gohri Deo (right) sitting on a man's head is an example of the older kardu-style rath

Pirdi Shaanu Mela

Pirdi

Two kilometres north of my home is the village of Badah. Below the village is a network of simple footpaths that take you on scenic walks through fields, orchards, across *nalas* (gullies) and seasonal streams, and on to other villages. Almost every day, I take one of these beautiful tracks that leads to the small village of Pirdi and its white, stone temple.

Over the many years I've walked through Pirdi, I have come to know the villagers. The mountain people are kind folk, always taking the time to chat with passersby. One farming family always stop me on my way through to offer fruit or freshly ground flour from their nearby fields. And in the three decades I have been walking this path, I have seen their children growing up and observed the loss of family elders. This particular family is very devoted to their local devta, god, Pirdi Mahadev—a devta of great importance in these parts since Mahadev is an aspect of Lord Shiva, one of the main Hindu gods.

The form of Pirdi Mahadev is very typical of this area of the Kullu Valley: metal *mohras* (masks) are placed on a 45 degree-angled base on a wooden structure that is part of a *rath* (palanquin) with poles so it can be carried. With mohras three and four across in five rows, Pirdi Mahadev is one of the largest raths in the valley and has a most impressive presence.

I have watched this devta travel to the Kullu Dusshera festival for more than thirty-five years, and am friendly with Shishu, the son of the *kardar* (main caretaker) of Pirdi Mahadev. Although probably ten years younger to me, his father, the kardar, is a very traditional man, and the language barrier makes it difficult to communicate. While Shishu has great respect for tradition, he has a generally progressive view on things, and the fact that he was educated at an English medium school is wonderful for me. As a result, we have had many illuminating discussions.

Seer
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The present-day temple at Pirdi, and the old one (taken in the 1970s)



Shishu's family hosting friends at their home during the festival at the Pirdi Mahadev temple

One day, in the course of one of these conversations, he invited me to attend a special *mela* (fair) at Pirdi at which the god Gohri Deo would also be present. He related the reason for the fair.

A long time ago (probably in the nineteenth century), there was terrible outbreak of *chechak* and *haiza* (which I found out were small-pox and cholera). Many lost their lives due to these awful diseases. After praying to the devta, the people of the area began to improve, and soon both illnesses disappeared. With total faith that it was their devta who removed this curse on them, the villagers created this annual fair in gratitude for the god's blessings.

For me, the most striking aspect of the mela is what is known as *devta khel*, a fascinating dance of gods and men.

The human partner in this dance is the gur, the oracle of the devta. The gur is selected by the devta itself—usually by casting omens, although there are other approaches. Traditionally, the gur has been from a low-caste native community, however, this practice has changed in the Kullu valley. Once selected, he must undergo tests and certain rituals. Every devta has its own methods to find out whether the selected candidate is a true gur.

Man sees through blind eyes, he has lost his inner deeper vision of the abstract, divine aspect of reality. To awaken this vision, the devtas communicate with their devotees through the gur. For the devta's devotees, the gur holds supreme authority as, through going into a trance, has direct contact with the devta and his words are considered the god's.

Once a man has been selected by the devta as his gur, he is supposed to follow a strict code of conduct prescribed for him by the devta and is required to observe certain rituals during his tenure as the spokesman of the god. One such stipulation is that he must not cut his hair, always covering his head (with cap or turban) when not in a trance.

To enter into a trance, the gur usually bares his body down to the waist. He then breathes in burning dhoop (incense) from a *darach*, which is a metallic bowl with a long handle, while invoking the devta. Tilting his head back, he continuously repeats sacred mantras, then his cap gently falls into an attendant's hands, revealing the gur's uncut hair. The gur then enters into a trance. He leaves his identity as a man and becomes the god. He now behaves in an extraordinary manner. Sometimes his demeanour is very gentle, blissful, and serene. While at other times, he shouts ferociously in an ancient language that only the trained ear can understand.





Not only the voice, but the gur's whole appearance changes when he is in a trance. From being a mere human being, the gentle son of a tailor, with his cap on, this man is transformed into the oracle of Pirdi Mahadev. His hair is let free, and he is unreservedly a vehicle for a supreme subtle entity. Some say that the gur's hair is like an antenna, a channel for the god. And it is noticeable that the gur pulls his hair away from his head, running it through his fingers, as if to receive the god more fully. On many occasions, I have met this man in other contexts, such as on the road or in town, and have been amazed how his appearance is so totally different. It's hard to believe these two images are of the same man.



Gurs of Gohri Deo

Since it is only when the gur is in a trance that the devta can easily respond to questions, the villagers take the opportunity to consult with the god. Mostly enquiries are related to family events or agricultural, such as, 'When should my son get married?' or 'Should I plant corn immediately or next week?' While in a trance, the gur answers questions in a number of ways. Some use rice grains as a method of responding, while others use a *paasaa*, a kind of dice, on which symbols are printed. Whatever the question, the answers are taken very seriously and always heeded. The words of the devta, via the gur, are not to be taken lightly.

Indeed, this reverence and devotion to some form of a divine power is a common feature of life all over the Kullu area. Divinity can be known, seen, and experienced when attending these festivals. Faith is foremost, and it is abundant in the traditions here. United by this faith, people of all hues lead their own unique, traditional and more modern ways of life symbiotically. These traditions have created a fascinating scene for the eyes, but which is only possible to know through the seer.



Grains of rice given as a blessing



Gur with the burning darach and gantha





Devta khel



Narsingha (curved horns) of Pirdi Mahadev

Katyali Mela

Bijli Mahadev & Pirdi Mahadev

Of the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, it is the last, with his consort, Parvati, who probably has the strongest presence in the Kullu area—not unexpectedly perhaps since he is said to have spent countless years meditating in the Himalayas. In the form of Bijli Mahadev (the god of lightning), he has a dramatically placed temple overlooking both the Vyaas and Parvati river valleys, and is subject to many local legends, such as the one that explains the hot springs at nearby Manikaran:

... when the goddess Parbatti [Parvati] was one day bathing with her husband, Mahadeo (the great god Shiva), she left her earrings—*manikarna*—on the bank and when she emerged from the water she found they had been stolen. Shiva was very angry and commanded the lesser gods to search for them. They were eventually traced to Patala, the mysterious underground Kingdom of Sesha, the serpent. When questioned about them, however, Sesha snorted with rage and the earrings, which he had hidden in his nostrils, flew out and returned to the goddess. Ever since this event boiling water has bubbled up from Patala through the little tunnels which the earrings made in their passage from the bowels of the earth.*

Bijli Mahadev descends from his mountain temple in late spring and visits his devotees and some of the other *devtas* (gods). In upper Badah near Katyali village (where I often walk), he meets Pirdi Mahadev on open ground. Many say that Pirdi Mahadev is the great grandson of Bijli Mahadev. On one occasion, I had the chance to ask one of the *gurs* (oracles of the god) if this was so. His answer, not surprisingly, was very ethereal. He said, yes, many people do say that, but in fact Shiv is one, and all of these devtas are one God.

* Penelope Chetwode, *Kulu: The End of the Habitable World*, (London: John Murray, 1972)



Recently, a temple has been constructed in Lord Shiv's honour at the spot where the two meet. Here, many villagers circle round the two devtas and enjoy their presence as they celebrate together in what is known in the local language as *devta khel*. 'Khel' means game or play, so devta khel is the play of the gods.

Traditionally, this play begins with the god or gods being invited to a temple or sacred ground. Once there, their *gurs* become absorbed into a trance after inhaling various herbs out of an ornate metal vessel called a *darach*. Then the *gurs* dance with each other. Sometimes, they hold hands and slowly move as if divinely choreographed. At other times, they take special iron objects, which resemble unusual daggers, stakes, and chains, and incorporate them into their movements. Their dance with these spiritual wares is remarkably graceful.





The gur's attendants await the sacred moment when he tips back his head and allows his cap to fall off, releasing his hair. After reciting mantras, and inhaling smoke from burning herbs, the gur becomes infused with the god



With the ridge of the Bijli Mahadev temple behind, the gurs dance between their beloved Pirdi Mahadev and Bijli Mahadev, as the villagers enjoy the vision of their gods

Having seen many of these devta khels, I have observed a very particular order in the use of the iron instruments and dancing between the gurs and that tradition is strictly upheld. Once the gurs have completed their dance, it is time for the devtas.

With two men holding the poles of the *rath* (palanquin) facing each other, they begin a very subtle, measured dance. They circle around the group of drummers and musicians sitting on the ground, who give rhythmic and melodic accompaniment to the movements of the gods. Surrounding the gods and the musicians, the spectators watch—with all joining in the joy and bliss of the meeting of the gods.



Miya, Shishu and Girish attend Pirdi Mahadev in this joyous festival



Pujari of Pirdi Mahadev



Gur of Bijli Mahadev (Kuber)



Gur of Pirdi Mahadev

Gur of Pirdi Mahadev (Kuber)

Gur of Bijli Mahadev





Bhaikhli Mata with the gur and naur

Kahika

Bhaikhli

Such is the richness of the culture of the Kullu valley that wherever one goes—every mountain top, valley or gorge, village or hamlet—one finds unique traditions, stories, and beliefs. This is certainly the case with Bhaikhli, the principal village on the mountain immediately north of where I live. Unlike most of the gods of the valley who travel to see other gods and distant devotees, its goddess, Devi Jagannathi, also often known as Bhaikhli Mata, never leaves her mountainside. The reason? She is represented as a young girl, too young to leave home. Similarly, she never comes out of her temple while the sun is out, so as to keep her complexion fair.

The line between history and myth is not as solid in the hills as in some places and the stories, which are passed down through the generations by word of mouth, are constantly evolving. The legend of Bhaikhli Mata is no exception, but here is one version I heard:

It is said that a young shepherd, a fine flute player, had gone with his friends to the forest to graze his flocks. As the boy played his flute, his friends became enraptured by the music and began to dance. Hearing the beautiful, melodious sound of the flute, two sisters came out of a nearby cave and also began to dance. The young shepherd noticed something odd about these two sisters. Though they danced wonderfully, their feet never touched the ground. Finding it curious, he chased them, attempting to catch the two girls. The sisters fled—one to Bhaikhli and the other to a village on the other side of the valley, Puid. The shepherd boy realized only then that these were no ordinary girls, and he asked for forgiveness. These sisters are known as Devi Jagannathi and Mata Bhubeneshwari.



Covered in sattu, barley flour, to ward away evil spirits

The village is also home to one of the more curious ceremonies to be found in Kullu...

It is May 2012, and I am on my way to Bhaikhli to witness my first *kahika*. A *kahika* hasn't taken place at Bhaikhli in twelve years (an unusually long gap) due to some village rivalries. The *kahika*, though uncommon, is not unique to Bhaikhli and is said to have originated in the nearby Lug valley, which begins just west of the mountain Bhaikhli lies on.

The ceremony I have come to see is explicitly about belief in the gods, the devta or devi, and their powers, and is performed to infuse the people with renewed faith. The name 'kahika' comes from the Sanskrit *kashtika*, meaning 'small piece of wood' and refers to the branches of the *kelo* (deodar) tree used in the ceremony. Four of these large branches are pitched, and then a piece of cloth is wrapped over them to form a canopy. (Interestingly, this is found in other religions, too: Christians refer to this kind of canopy as a 'tabernacle,' while Jews call it a *chuppah*.) At Bhaikhli, the canopy has been erected just outside the temple and as I arrive the ceremony is about to begin.

A man chosen from the *naur* caste (who are believed to be the first inhabitants of Kullu) is brought under the canopy. Wearing a colourful turban, he stands out—as other male members of his family wear turbans made of white gauze—while his wife and sister have colourful cloth draped over their shoulders. Thus, the *naur* and his family are visually isolated from the crowd of thousands.

The *naur* has abstained from food for twenty-four hours. Then he is given a certain combination of herbs, before a silver rupee coin smeared with *ghee* (clarified butter) is placed in his mouth. The *pujari* (priest) fires small arrows, which are made of the same deodar tree as the *kahika*, in all four compass directions. I can feel the crowd's anticipation as, finally, he shoots a fifth arrow up into the sky. At that very moment, the *naur* drops to the ground.

In ceremonial terms, he is dead and he certainly appeared to me to have fallen completely unconscious. The *gurs* (oracles of the gods), along with the *devtas* (accompanied by many attendants), and members of the *naur's* family form a procession. They begin to circle around the temple area.

Sattu (barley flour) is thrown to keep devilish spirits away at this dangerous time for the *naur* and soon everyone and everything is covered in a fine white powder. As the procession climbs the stairs, men are fiercely blowing their horns, while others are pounding their drums in a piercing trance beat. The puffs of white *sattu* in the air add to the mysterious atmosphere.



The rath of Kashyap Narayan. Usually covered, the main mohra is facing up towards the sky



Gods, gurs, naur and devotees making rounds of the temple ground

Eight devtas are there in all their glory, and their gurs—bare from the waist up, their uncut hair loose—are channelling the devtas' power. The beat of the drums is loud and penetrating. You can feel it pulsating through your body. Covered in sattv, everyone is dancing in praise of the divine, life-giving powers. It is vital the energy remain focused, and so cameras, which the villagers in Bhaikhli believe might affect the energy, have to be put away. In harmony with their beliefs, I stop taking pictures—though there is, of course, a slight photographer's regret.

Meanwhile, the lifeless naur is hauled three times around the temple grounds and soon the procession takes on a different feel. As I look ahead, I can see a corpse on the ground, surrounded by four metal stakes and covered in a white shroud. It is guarded by one of the gurs, while the crowd watches at a safe distance of five or six feet.

At the same time, a man with a phallus-shaped gourd is (there is no way of getting around this) attempting to hump the gur, while the gur remains in a trance-like, godly state. Naturally, the crowd finds this hilarious. (One of the



Women watching awestruck by the event unfolding below them on the temple ground (above); Naur (circled lower right) fully revived after the fourth round of the temple ground, with the golden idol of Bhaikhli Mata behind him



remarkable aspects of the ceremony is how fertility rites, as well as those associated with mortality, are very much present.)

Suddenly, some men start shouting out and jumping up and down erratically. They are being possessed by the power of the devtas. Their shouting heralds the arrival of two more devtas. It is only now, after three attempts, that the naur is revived by the power of the gods. As the naur returns to life, he is led once more around the temple ground. He is on his feet but has to be supported. With each round of the temple, the naur becomes stronger, and by the fourth he can walk unassisted. The people are jubilant—the naur lives!

However, should the naur die during the kahika, which has not happened in living memory, there are severe consequences. Then it is customary for his family members to expropriate all the wealth of the attending devtas, including the masks that make up the gods. In this case, it is up to the villagers to make their devtas anew—to acquire the gold and silver and hire the craftsmen and other people needed to recreate their gods and so, once more, restore the faith of the people of the village.

Next page: The naur with his colourful turban after being revived (lower centre right); the wife of the naur dancing in celebration of the life-giving ability of the devta (centre right); Devindra and I in the crowd (upper right)







Temples





Temples

‘What was the tree, what wood in sooth produced [the Universe], from which they fashioned out the earth and heaven?’ Thus wondered the rishis in the Rig-Veda (10.82.4), India’s oldest text. They imagined Vishwakarma, the divine architect, the maker of all, as a woodcutter and carpenter (also a sculptor and blacksmith) creating the Universe out of an unfathomable tree. To this day, in Himachal Pradesh, all the craftsman consider themselves descendants of Vishwakarma, and one of their greatest expressions is, as we shall see, the mountainous land’s temples.

The sacred soil of these Himalayas has given birth to unique religious beliefs and rituals and temples are, of course, integral to those practices. One of the first things that struck me when I arrived in Kullu, all those years ago, was how the temples are mostly wooden in structure and detail. Naturally, due to the harsh mountain weather, some stone is used in conjunction with wood, but it seems that here in *Dev Bhumi* (the Land of the Gods) the people emulated Vishwakarma in carving out trees to make their world.

The concept of a temple is an extension of faith. The temple is the abode of God, certainly, but here (unlike on the Plains) it tends to express an abstract form of devotion since temples rarely house a *murti* (image of the god) nor even the religious artefacts associated with the *devta*, or god. What is also striking in Kullu is that the temples are not only places of religious worship, rather the entire grounds surrounding the temple are a venue for social and cultural activity as well.

In Himachal Pradesh, we find four basic styles of temples: pagoda, pahari, tower, and shikhar. Some have clearly found inspiration in styles that originated elsewhere in India, but as the mountains give rise to their own unique valleys and peaks, so the temples of this area do not necessarily follow the classical rules of temple geometry or history. This only adds extra charm to the already charming environment of Dev Bhumi.

The wooden *pagoda* style temples are only found in Himachal Pradesh in India and even here are rather rare. As a result, these splendid constructions have become generally well known and often have become tourist attractions such as the ones to Hadimba in Manali or Tripura Sundari in Naggar. Equally fascinating, though, are the smaller, almost unknown ones, such as those to Triyogi Narayan in Diyar and Adi Brahma in Khokhan.

The *pahari* type (pent-roofed) temples are without doubt the most common in these hills. They are reminiscent of a single-storey mountain house in style: mainly wooden, with sloping slate roofs and a huge deodar (or sometimes spruce or pine) beam in the middle supporting the roof. The justly best known example is the one for Bijli Mahadev, which also has a dramatic location, but the more ordinary village temple can be equally beautiful, such as Chamunda Devi's near Naggar.

The (timber-bonded) *tower* temples have their own unique history, as I shall discuss, and were once a common sight in the Kullu area. Many have fallen (or been pulled) down over the years, but in some villages, such as Kamand, new ones in the old style have been erected — thus keeping the tradition alive.

The *shikhar* style is probably what most people in the world would imagine if they thought of 'an Indian temple': a heavy, ornately carved stone tower that tapers to a rounded point, sometimes described as an Indian pyramid. Generally, in Kullu, these date to an earlier period (around a thousand years ago) and a few excellent examples have survived in Bajaura and around Naggar.

It is interesting to note that the rishis who composed the Rig-Veda, which speculated about Vishwakarma hewing the world from wood, are among those who have had magnificent temples built in their honour here in the Kullu Valley. It is fitting that the seers Parashar, Manu, Jamdagni, Vasisht, and Markhandey are worshipped alongside figures from the Sanskrit epics, such as Hadimba Devi, and the many forms of Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh, the Hindu trinity.



Temple to Jamdagni Rishi



Newer carvings at the entrance to the temple complex emulate those on the temple itself

Pagoda Style Temples

Adi Brahma Temple

If one travels around India, it is noticeable that while one finds many temples dedicated to Vishnu and Shiva (in their many different forms and avatars), it is almost impossible to discover any dedicated to the third god in the Hindu trinity, the creator, Lord Brahma. Doubtless, there are many reasons, but one of the most repeated is because Brahma was cursed by Shiva. The ancient Shiva Purana scripture recounts the story as follows:

Brahma and Vishnu got into fierce verbal duel about which of them was greater. To settle the matter, they went to Shiva, who set them a challenge: he assumed the form of an *anaalstambh* (pillar of fire) and said whichever of the two could reach its end was the greater. Brahma assumed the form of a swan and began his journey into the sky. Meanwhile, Vishnu took the form of a boar (Varaha) and dug down through the earth and the nether world. They both pursued their quest for thousands of years, yet neither found the end of the pillar of fire.

Humbled, Vishnu decided to finish his search. At the same time, Brahma saw a withered *ketaki* (screw pine) flower wafting slowly down from high above him. He asked the flower whence it came. The flower replied that it had been there since the beginning of creation. Brahma asked about the top of the pillar, but the *ketaki* flower said it was impossible to find. Yet Brahma's ego would not let him admit defeat, and, instead, he persuaded the *ketaki* flower to give false testament.

Brahma went to Vishnu and said he had reached the top of the *anaalstambh*, and, since the *ketaki* flower confirmed his statement, Vishnu believed Brahma and acknowledged his superiority. Shiva, who knew all, was furious and cursed both the liars: Brahma and the *ketaki* flower. The flower could never be used to worship Shiva and Brahma would never have any temple constructed in his name.



Nevertheless, despite Shiva's curse, Brahma is worshipped in a handful of places in India. The most famous is at Pushkar in Rajasthan, and I had often been told (as it is generally believed) there were maybe only a couple more across the whole subcontinent. You can imagine my surprise when I discovered there are four Brahma temples within a short distance of my house!

The most impressive of these is the Adi Brahma temple, which sits in the heart of the very quaint village of Khokhan. Although only a few kilometres from Bhuntar (one of the main towns of the valley and the site of the airport), Khokhan is not well known, and even from close by its multi-tiered wooden temple is somehow hidden. I must have walked by it many times over the years before noticing it.

It is a very fine example of the pagoda style. However, a unique aspect of this temple is that the upper tier is not conical, as in other structures of this type, but a gable and pent construction—not unlike a very small pahari temple. By comparison to other temples in Mandi of a known date of construction, it is believed the wooden pagoda was built in the fifteenth century, almost certainly on the site of an earlier stone temple, the relics of which can still be seen in the grounds.

However, as often in the hills the dry historical account has to be balanced with a more divinely inspired one. On one of my first visits to Khokhan, I met Ram Nath, a kind and gentle pujari, who recounted the story of how one of his ancestors discovered Adi Brahma.



The fourth tier is unusual in that it is not round, as is typical of other pagoda style temples in this area, but a pent and gable design

She was a Rajput woman who earned her livelihood doing farm work. Once, while she was in the fields, she left her young daughter to sleep under the shade of a tree. As a good mother, she kept a watchful eye on her six-month-old child, and noticed the girl was scrabbling in the earth trying to retrieve something. The woman took her *kilnee* (a hoe-like tool) and began digging in search of what had captured the interest of her baby. Eventually, the *kilnee* hit a metallic object. She dug more carefully and there emerged a finely carved smiling face made of gold—the *mohra* (mask) of Adi Brahma. That original mask still has a mark on its cheek where it was hit by the *kilnee*.

While there have been some documented changes to the temple, by and large, it has not been significantly ‘restored’. However, the temple grounds have been recently renovated, the ornately carved entrance gate being the most obvious change. But whatever the changes, the temple grounds are always open, and are rarely left with no one around. It is the central place (and centrepiece) of the village. One can often see bright red chillies drying in the sun next to the aged stone relics, or children playing and singing in the courtyard. What a beautiful approach: not to separate daily life from matters of God.





Ram Nath's ancestor originally found the mask in the earth



The Triyugi Narayan temple in Diyar has been written about for centuries.
Women enjoying rides at the annual Sharhi fair at the Tripura Sundari temple grounds in Naggar



Children emulating their elders with their devta, taken in the early 1980s at the Hadimba temple in Manali



The recently painted temple to Bijli Mahadev. The wooden pole (dhwaj) in the foreground is used to attract blessings in the form of bolts of lightning

Pahari Type Temples

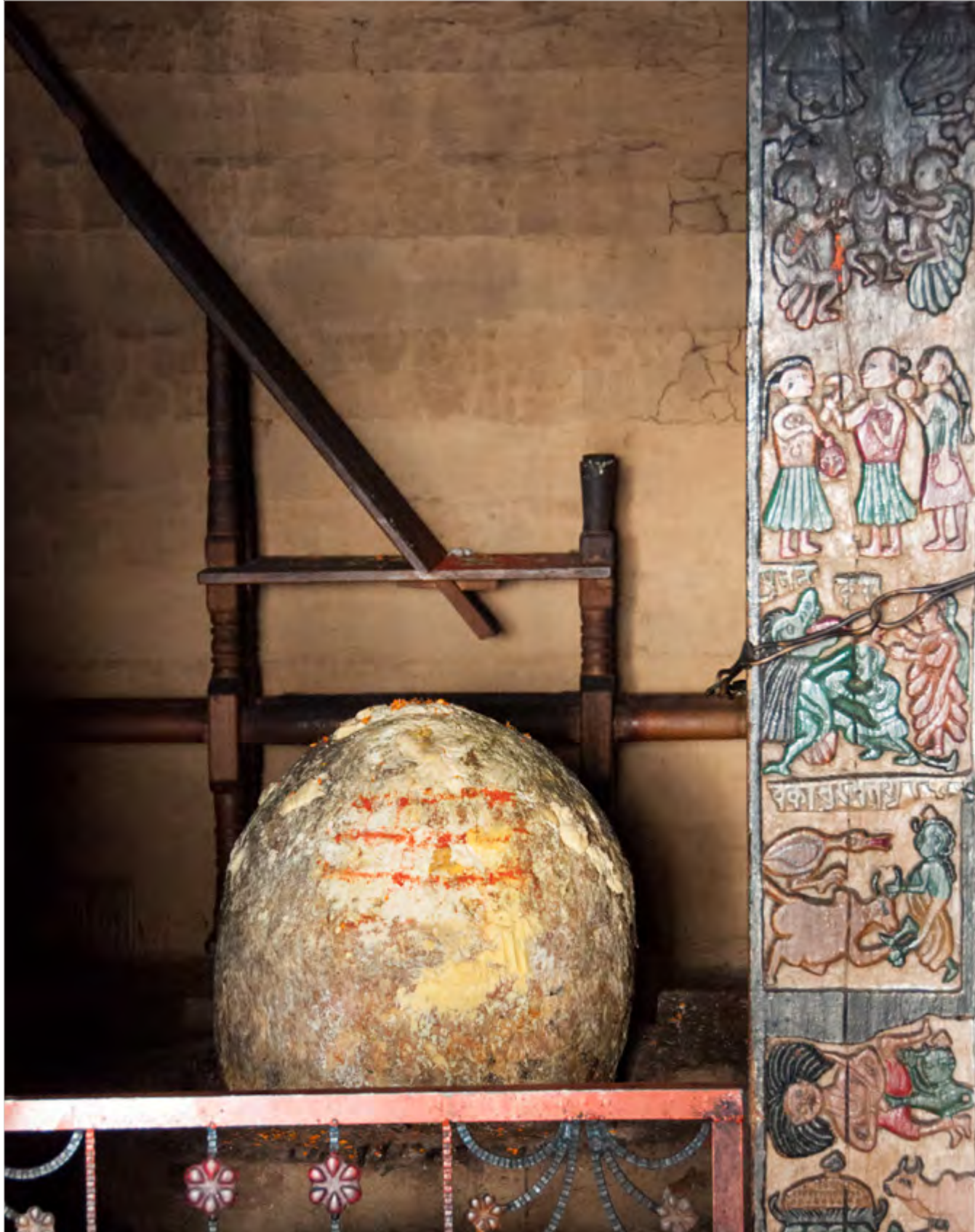
Bijli Mahadev Temple

For hundreds of years, travellers have spoken of one temple in the Kullu valley: the shrine to Bijli Mahadev (an aspect of Lord Shiva as the god of lightning). It is an outstanding example of the pahari style and is breathtakingly located on a bare truncated spur looking down on the confluence of the Vyaas and the Parvati rivers 4,100 feet (1,400 metres) below. I have made the alluring climb up the mountain (which is 8,100 feet (2,450 metres) above sea level) in sun, rain, and snow and have never failed to be astonished as I come out of the trees on to the huge grassed ridge and see the temple.

As with all pahari type temples, the shrine is pent-roofed with a massive central deodar beam supporting a sloping slate roof beneath it. Intentionally built to survive the snowfall of Himachal winters, temples of this style mirror not only the vernacular domestic architecture but also the form of the mountains themselves. Although, over the years I have visited, there have been some superficial modifications (such as marble on the steps) the size and shape of the temple has remained untouched—and earlier accounts indicate it has had its present form for generations.

Most temples of this type have a walkway around the inner sanctum, which allows devotees to perform *parikrama*, a form of prayer in which you circumambulate the temple while repeating mantras. Usually, these are stone pathways, often exposed to the elements, but in this case, an enclosed balcony surrounds the treasure within.

Upon entering the temple, the scent of flowers, ghee, and wood-smoke is overwhelming. The pillars and entranceway to the sanctum sanctorum are covered with detailed but robust wood carvings. They have been colourfully painted, but, especially towards to the ceiling, are partly blackened with years of residue from the sacred fire-pit. The atmosphere is mystical.



The ghee-smeared Shiv lingam and the structure of Bijli Mahadev's rath in the inner sanctum of the temple

At the far wall sits the structure of Bijli Mahadev's *rath* (palanquin). It is made of deodar wood taken only from a sacred glade on the opposite mountain side, a couple of thousand feet above where I live. The glade is part of a forest that is in the name of the *devta* (god) Jamdagni Rishi, who is considered to rule the peaks of Khoti Maharaja (as this side of the valley is known). Trees from that forest can only be cut with permission from the *devta* and his *kardhar*, his human caretaker.

At the very centre of the sanctum sanctorum is a most impressive, ghee-smeared lingam (measuring, I would estimate, roughly four feet across). The rounded stone is the subject of the most famous story associated with the temple. Being placed on a high, exposed mountain ridge, the temple is on occasion struck by lightning. It is said that the bolt of lightning can descend from the roof and shatter the visible part of the huge lingam (the base of the lingam is believed to rest on the valley floor below). Subsequently, the *pujari*, using ghee as an adhesive, pastes the lingam seamlessly back into its original form. And so, as we have seen again and again, man, nature, and God always come together in the Hills—never separate from one another.



Seer Temples



Many stone carvings are in front of the temple, looking out at the exquisite view of the mountain peaks and Paravati and Kullu valleys



A temple roof illustrating the graphic impact of the pahari style



Temple to Jagannathi Mata at Puid, exhibiting a very traditional structure.
Chamunda Devi temple at Nashala



Temples to Kashyap Narayan just off the Bhaikhli–Vyaasar road



Timber bonded temple to Parashar Rishi in the village of Kamand

Tower Style Temples

Parashar Rishi Temple

As you approach a Kullu village, it is often hard to spot the temple since its construction, materials, and positioning are similar to the houses that surround it. Sometimes, though, from afar, a tall building (four or more storeys high) dominates the view and immediately intrigues you.

These unusual (and relatively rare) structures are tower temples. Unlike the other temple types, they were originally built not as religious edifices, but rather as multipurpose buildings in which the *devta* (god) was given the highest position on the uppermost floor. Lower floors were used as a storehouse for foodstuffs, as well as weapons and other rare or valuable objects.

I have been told that they were designed for defensive purposes. This explains why they are positioned in the centre, the heart of the village. And also they generally do not have a permanent wooden staircase, but a removable ladder—often just notches cut in a small tree trunk—that could be pulled up in times of danger, not unlike a drawbridge in Medieval Europe. Thus, the tower, which contained many valuable sacred artefacts, served as a protector, while its height reflected the divinity of its contents.

Due to the constant threat of seismic activity, timber-bonded stonework has become a tradition here, giving a stable form for these tall temples (as well as normal houses). The lateral beams are able to move without causing the building to collapse and can absorb the shocks of all but the most severe earthquakes.

In recent times, the main threat to these fine buildings has often been neglect, while some were pulled down and the materials reused since they no longer had a defensive purpose. The remaining ones serve nowadays as *bhandars*, or storehouses, for religious artefacts and, at certain times of the year, grain or other crops offered to the *devta*.



The art of timber bonding at the temple to Parashar Rishi in the village of Kamand



They are still impressive structures with a cantilevered verandah all around the top floor that appears as if it cannot be held by the smaller base—in the same way that man is a mere mortal appearance and seems unable to carry the divine, yet it is only in the head of a human being that perception of the significance of the divine can ever arise.

One place that has not succumbed to the trend to abandon tower temples—rather they have built new ones—is the extraordinary village of Kamand. It is home to a most interesting temple to the Vedic seer Parashar Rishi.

You approach Kamand on a bridle path through an enchanted forest, and the first view of the village brings about a sense of another era, perhaps from the ancient Indian scriptures (Parashar Rishi was the father of Vyaas). Upon entering the village, you immediately sense that this is a special place. The people are friendly, welcoming, and proud. And one of the objects of their (justifiable) pride is the tower style temple to Parashar Rishi. Probably constructed as recently as the 1990s, it stands tall like the Himalayan peaks, while the doorway sits far below as if in a hidden vale. (A much older pagoda type temple is tucked away in the forest about half an hour's walk above the village.)

On my first visit, I took some photos of a hundred-year-old mountain woman at the temple ground. Three years later, after several very cold, severe winters, I again went to Kamand, and was delightfully surprised to see the same woman, now a hundred and three, taking an afternoon nap in the early spring sun. I wondered how many changes and temple construction and repair she had witnessed in her long life. Yet, though much older than the current temple, she is a child compared with the long tradition of which it is a wonderful example.



Taken on two trips to Kammand. Mountain lady at 100 and 101 years old



The remarkable woman at 103 years old sitting in front of one of the temple buildings



With stone and wood in great abundance, the mountains and forests have proved to be a great resource for many bhandars



A newly constructed temple in the village of Lot dedicated to their devta, Narayan. Timber bonded structures have alternating courses of dry stone and deodar wooden beams

Seer
Temples



Shikhar Style Temples

Basesara Mahadev Temple

The most ancient surviving shrine in the Kullu valley is the Basesara Mahadev temple at Haat near Bajaura. Dedicated to Lord Shiva as Basesara Mahadev, Lord of the Universe, it is a remarkable piece of ornately carved stone architecture in the shikhar style familiar from the Plains of India.

Legend has it that the Pandavs, during their exile to the forest as recounted in the Mahabharata, constructed this temple in just one day. A more prosaic scientific estimate is that it dates from the eighth to ninth centuries and would have been built over a period of many years. What is not in doubt is that its sturdy architecture has enabled it to survive many natural disasters, including the most devastating earthquake of recent times in 1905.

The *garbha griha*, the inner sanctum of the temple, opens to a doorway on the east side and contains the Shiva lingam. In front, two figures of Ganga and Yamuna (the personification of the two sacred rivers) beautifully flank the main doorway. There are magnificent carvings of gods on the remaining three sides of the temple: to the west, a standing figure of Vishnu; to the south, a beautiful Ganesh; while on the north...

Well, wherever you find Shiva you also find Shakti. Shakti can take form as a benevolent mother, as in the case of Uma or Parvati, but she can also take the form of Mahishasuramardini, a destroyer of demons. And the north side of this wonderful temple (facing the eternal snows of Lahaul) features a remarkable relief of Mahishasuramardini—her eight arms wielding different kinds of weapons to destroy the ignorance that besets the world.



Finely carved reliefs of Ganga and Yamuna, the two river goddesses



Mahishasuramardini

Seer Temples

There are relatively few examples of the shikhar type of temple in the Kullu district, although a favourite of mine is the Muralidhar (Krishna) temple above Naggar at Thawa. A grand stone structure that is all that remains of the old capital of the kingdom. However, if you travel to Kullu from Delhi or Chandigarh at the right time of the year, you get to see some more beautiful stone temples—in a very unusual location.



Northeast view of the Krishna temple at Thawa



View from the west of the Krishna temple at Thawa. The structure in the foreground is a rath used in the Dussehra celebrations at the temple



Eleventh-century Gauri Shankar temple looking out over the Kullu valley (Naggar)



In 1963, the Bhakra dam was completed creating the Gobind Sagar reservoir and submerging twenty-eight ancient temples near Bilaspur under hundreds of feet of water. Twelve of these were of great archaeological importance and, like the Basesara Mahadev temple, date back to the eight and ninth centuries.

At certain times of the year, the water recedes and the temples are fully visible. Local people then farm the mineral-rich land and graze their cows and buffalos. When the water rises, it has a mystical, otherworldly appearance. Buffalo cool off in the lake. And the silt and mud, dried by the high-altitude sun, cracks and flakes as if it is being destroyed by the very Lord Shiva, the Dissolver of the Three Worlds, in whose honour these temples were first built.







Gompa





Dechen Choekhor Mahavihara Gompa

Buddhism begins with the story of a prince, Gautam, who would become the Buddha. As he grew to manhood in his father's palace, all the gold and jewels, all the luxury of silks, all the regal delights were not enough to curb Gautam's gnawing curiosity about life outside. Never having been exposed to the elderly, the sick, or the dead, he had no idea of their existence, until one day he ventured out of his palace. Under the guidance of his charioteer, Channa, these aspects of humanness were revealed to him unexpectedly and their impact was earthshattering. He resolved to renounce his princely life and began his quest to put an end to the suffering of all beings and uphold compassion and other virtues.

That journey resulted in his attaining a state of consciousness that liberated him from suffering and he began teaching others to do the same. His evolved awareness spread his vision far and wide and later became known as Buddhism, one of the many great spiritual traditions born in India.

Although today there is little sign of Indian Buddhism, until about twelve hundred years ago it was as widespread as what is now called Hinduism. A number of Chinese pilgrims have left accounts of Buddhist India, and in AD 635, one, Hiuen Tsiang, visited a kingdom he called 'Kiu-lo-to' and described it as having over a thousand monks in twenty monasteries. Not only that but it also had a stupa built by the Emperor Ashok that marked where the Buddha had preached.

Kiu-lo-to was Hiuen's version of 'Kuluta' — the old name of Kullu.

None of those monasteries are probably in existence now, and the stupa was apparently moved to Delhi by the Mughals, but even since Buddhism's decline the Kullu valley has had more contact with Buddhists than most of India. It borders the Tibetan Buddhist areas of Lahaul, Spiti, and Kinnaur, which are all now part of India, and is considered to be one of the twenty-four holy places of the deity Chakrasamvara. And the area was visited by Guru Padmasambhava on his way to Tibet where he created the current Buddhist tradition.

Ever since I first came to Kullu, I have been aware of the influence of Tibetan Buddhism in the valley—refugees from Tibet have settled here, there is a strong presence of Lahaulis, and several gompas (monasteries) have been established. However, one gompa took time to make its presence felt.

When the construction of the Dechen Choekhor monastery at Sarabai began, no one noticed, I certainly did not. It remained quietly hidden as it was slowly built. I must have gazed out over the valley thousands of times, yet never remarked its gradual appearance. Years in the making, so close by, and yet I never could see it!

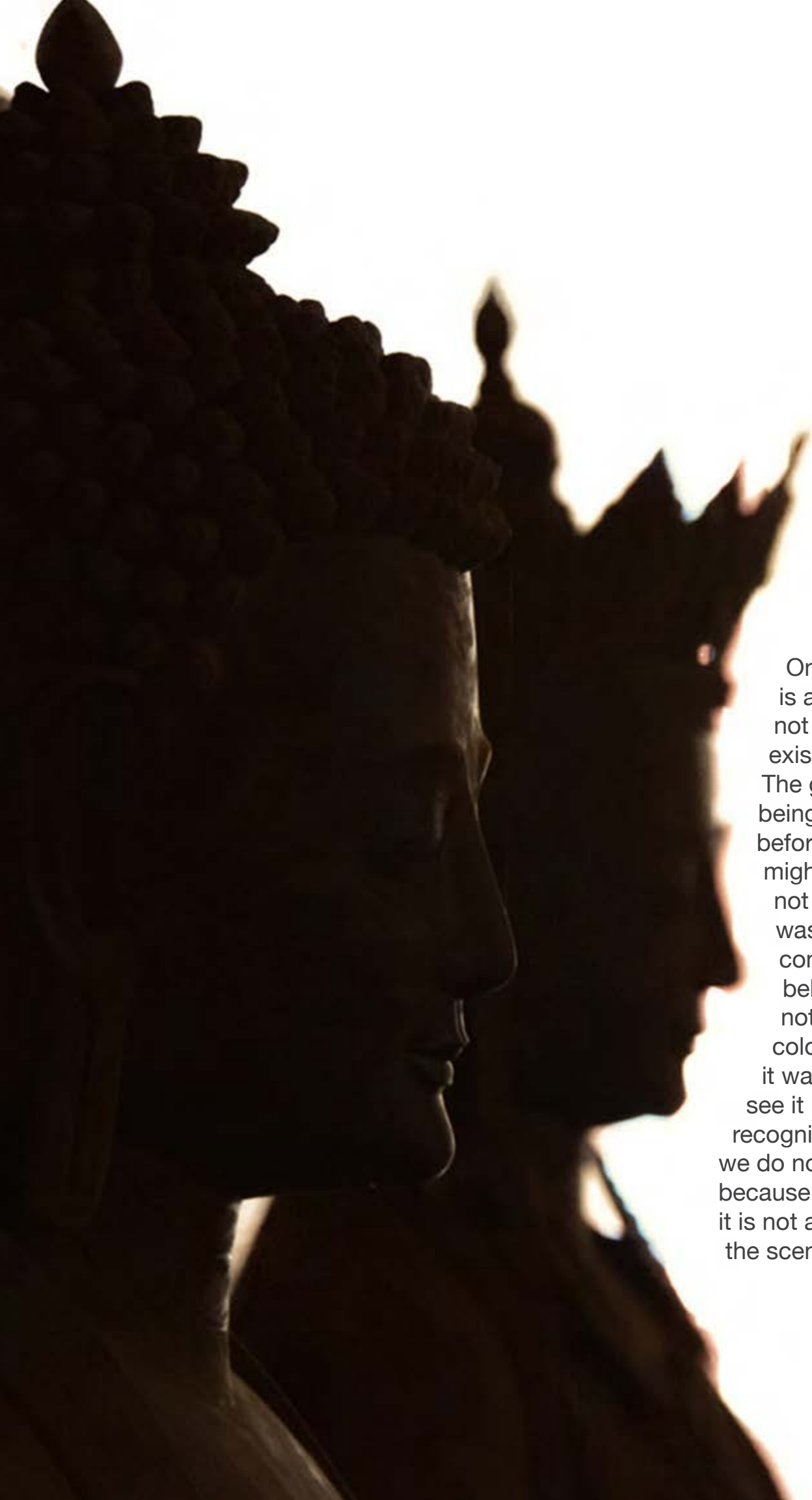
So seeing it for the first time was unexpected—an unexpected pleasure, since while it is not a large gompa, it is certainly the most beautiful in the area.

'De' means bliss, 'chen' means great, 'choe' means dharma, 'khor' means abode, so its name can be translated as the Dharma Abode of Great Bliss. It is part of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage, which has monasteries all over the Himalayas and is the major sect in Bhutan. The Dechen Choekhor 'mother monastery' was built in Tibet in the sixteenth century and became the cultural focal point for more than three hundred monasteries that branched out from it.

Like everyone I was aware of events in Tibet and came to know that this new gompa was being built to give a home to the many monks and nuns who wish to maintain the Dechen Choekhor tradition, but no longer have access to the mother monastery. Thus, the spiritual tradition of offering humanity freedom from suffering, begun by the disaffected prince Gautam, is again being taught in the Kullu valley as it was over a thousand years ago.



Monk leaving the main hall after puja



One only sees what is apparent. However, not everything that has existence is apparent to us. The gompas at Sarabai were being built for many years before anyone saw them. We might conclude that they could not be seen because they were in the early stages of construction, they were hidden behind forest, or they were not painted the startling colours they are now. However, they were there. We did not see them because we did not recognise them. In this subtle way, we do not recognise the Seer because though it has existence it is not apparent to us—it is not the scene.





Celebrating the Tibetan New Year at the gompa



Young monk at the celebration





Sculptors

Once I had discovered the gompa, I enjoyed visiting it and in particular being able to witness the progress of the statues, which are not only beautiful but provide an important focus for Buddhist practitioners, both monks and lay people. The sculptors had been invited to come from Bhutan (where the Drukpa Kagyu lineage is an important cultural force) to create these beautiful aspects of the Buddha, deities, and teachers. I was fascinated by how the divine was created from the combination of simple materials and enormous skill. In order to give strength to the massive sculptures, a mix of cotton, clay, water, and camphor is beaten and mixed together. Metal reinforcement is used to support the frame and limbs. Attention to detail is vital. Every gesture (*mudra* in Sanskrit) has a different meaning, and so hands are precisely sculpted to portray the correct aspect. It was no surprise to learn that the sculptures made here at the Dechen Choekhor Mahavihara gompa have been exhibited in many Tibetan monasteries all over Himachal Pradesh.



Thangkas

Not only are sculptures created here at the gompa, but it is also home to an art school, specialising in thangka painting. Thangkas are created on cloth scrolls and typically depict a very detailed and precise iconography, which is used for teaching or personal contemplation by the Buddhist practitioner. The school teaches its students (who are not all monks or even Buddhists) this extremely involved and difficult art and in so doing hopes to preserve Tibet's cultural, spiritual, and artistic traditions and pass them on to coming generations. A visit to the school leaves one with the sense of the quiet concentration and dedication of the students and the confidence that this art will survive long into the future.



As the image is built up, the colour palette is tested on the edge of the canvas



Mandalas

Of all the thangkas, the mandala is the most striking. Visually, it is a tightly balanced, geometric composition of wonderful colours and intricacy. And even if one is unfamiliar with Buddhism, he can see that the symbolism of mandalas must be rich in tradition. As with almost all art originating in India, the mandala is a tool for gaining wisdom and an aid to contemplation or meditation. Symmetry is a key component to the art of the mandala. The outer form of these holy circles is a geometrical diagram, a yantra, and each detail of its construction has symbolic meaning, which is usually learnt over a long period of time. And at the centre, the principal deity is housed. The mandala serves as a tool of invocation, the calling in and realization of the spiritual force of that deity within the contemplator himself. Yet, all these different picture tools (sculptures, thangkas, mandalas) have essentially the same inner meaning and purpose: the scene brings you to the Seer.





Before and after: different stages in the completion of the statues of the Buddha (above) and Padmasambhava, the Buddha, and Tara (right)







Monks conversing after puja



Carvings





Carvings on the temple to Ganesh

Previous page: A handmade curtain of dowels, jhaalar, line the roof's edge, singing a gentle mountain song in the wind

Carvings

Long before humans began to hew hard materials to make tools, art, and artifacts, Nature was doing its own fascinating carving. Seemingly soft, a constant flow of water smooths away the roughness of rock and carves a crevice, which, over time, can become a canyon miles deep. In the same way, over the years, a tree's branches begin to bend away from the prevailing wind. Much faster is fire. A raging inferno devours the vegetation and trees in its path—etching new patterns in a forest. These are some of the ways Nature tells its own story—of time and space and inevitable change. Perhaps seeing this, humans began to use similar methods to tell their own story of the divine through carving.

In these mountains, although there has been some exquisite stone carving, such as the Basesara Mahadev temple, it is in the work in wood that we find the deepest expression of the people's faith and values. Vast forests cover many of the hillsides and there are many species of beautiful trees, but one species has been considered the sacred wood out of which temples and statues have been hewn: the deodar, or Himalayan cedar (*Cedrus deodara*).

Indigenous to the area, the deodar yields a wood that, if dried properly, is resistant to insects and other pests and may last well over a thousand years. But even the best material needs skilled hands to shape it. For centuries, the village artisans and carpenters have worked the wood to produce devotional imagery that links present-day worship to the ancient myths, legends, and rituals.

One of the first things I noticed when I began to visit the temples in the valley was how often I saw serpents—carved ones. These *nagas*, as the snake gods are known here, are integral to the faith of the Kullu folk and I discuss below some of the reasons why. Besides the almost omnipresent snakes, I found that images of saints and sages, which indicate the union of man and god, are also a common theme. The decorative symbols and motifs appear to be taken, like the wood, from the natural world around. Circular floral patterns mimic wild flowers in the fields. And birds and animals are frequently found. Also, the geometric patterns used in local weaving repeat themselves on many temple walls.

Without any sense of separation, those who work the sacred wood believe they also have a divine ancestor: Vishwakarma, the patron god of craftsmen. The craftsman caste of professionals trace themselves back to this divine architect and fashioner of the Universe. The day after Diwali (the festival of lights) belongs to Vishwakarma, and in his honour, all craftsmen worship their implements on this day. The tools themselves are treated as deities. Thus, sacred tools in the hands of the descendants of the divine architect bring forth from the holy wood images of the sages, gods, and religious symbols. Nothing is not divine.



Wood carvings on the door of the Brahma temple



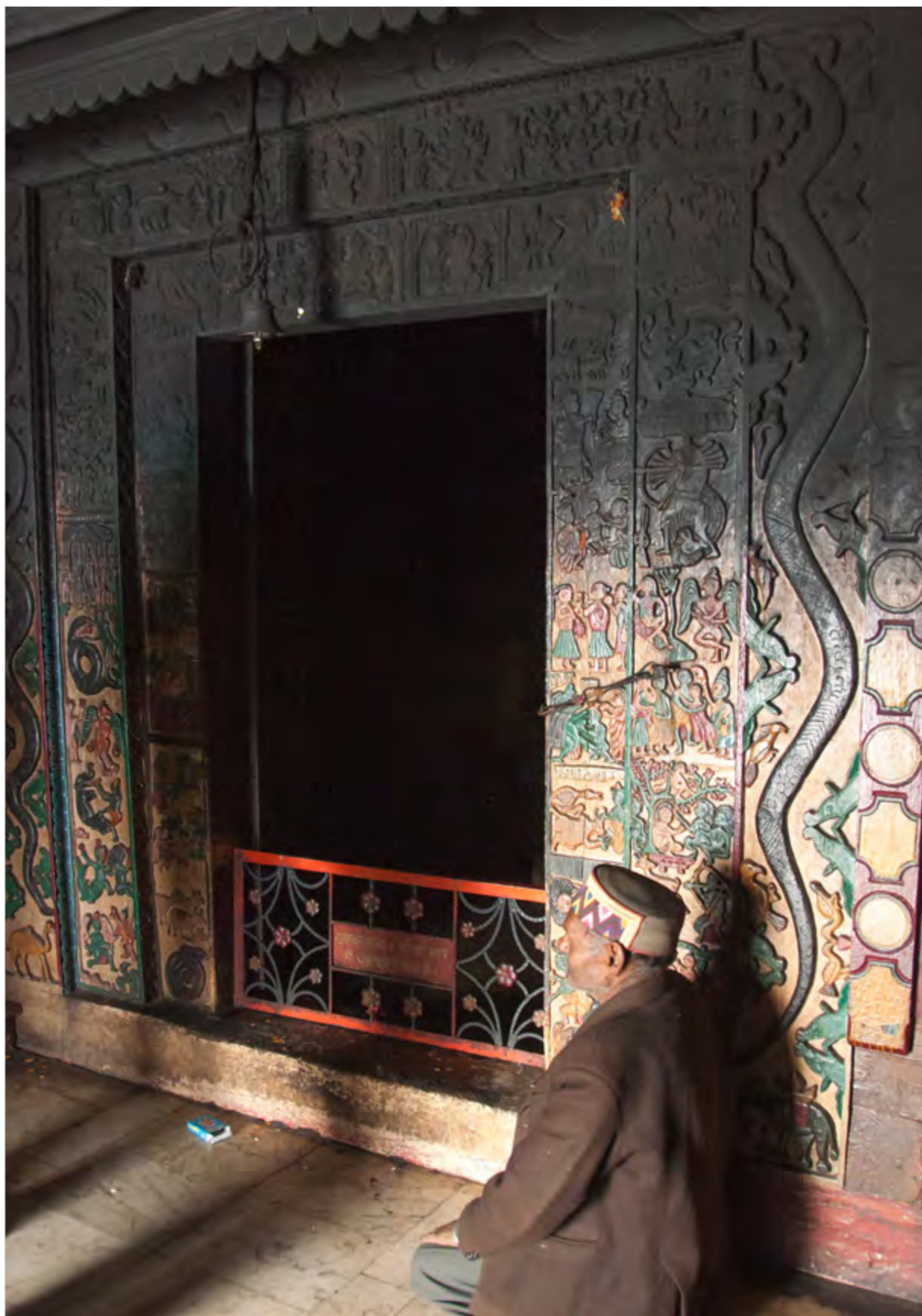
Carpenter using an adze to coarsely cut the basic form of a pillar

Nag, Serpent Carvings

The Kullu valley, particularly the northern upper valley, is the land of *Athara Kardu*—where eighteen (athara) serpents fell out of Jamdagni Rishi's basket (kardu) as he was trying to cross over the Chanderkhaani Pass. There are many myths regarding the significance of these serpents, and I have found that in each village the stories differ. While the depictions of the serpents carved on temples are very similar, each has his own name and qualities. What is more confusing is that many of the nag devtas are named after Vedic rishis and munis, who were said to have engaged in spiritual practice in these legendary mountains. Local historians and academics take this as evidence that originally the nagas were worshipped in their own right (and some still retain a nag name) and only later other names from more orthodox Hinduism became attached to them.

Nagas are regarded as lords of *Patal Lok*, the Underworld. And it is generally believed that they have the power to control the subterranean sources of water. Perhaps by association with this aquatic power, in Himachal, nag devtas have become also regarded as masters of weather. Some say lightning resembles the fast zigzag movement of a snake, and that the ferocious thunder and rain that inevitably follow come from the might of the same nagas. Thunder represents the fear and respect and, hence, the devotion to the weather god who brings life-giving rain.

Of these weather gods, Kashyap Narayan is considered to be extremely powerful, particularly in bringing rain, and is worshipped extensively on the right bank of the River Vyaas. While one of the most important gods of the valley Bijli Mahadev is Lord Shiv, he is Lord Shiv as the god of lightning (*bijli*) and in his incense and smoke-filled temple we find extraordinary carvings. Covered with soot from the years of burning fires, these mystical images are of the gods, scenes of human life, and, of course, magnificent, massive, serpentine nagas.



Wood carvings covered with years of soot from burning fires



In the Himalayas, we find that the saints and sages are not always in the form of carvings



Circular nag carvings at the temple ground of Tripura Sundari in Nagar



Uniquely in Kullu, Kashyap Narayan temples are very decoratively painted



Detail of doorway at a Kashyap Narayan temple: peacocks, snakes, and repeated floral patterns



Nag carvings at the Jamdagni Rishi temple well



Temple to Narayan, an aspect of Vishnu whose vehicle is a divine bird Garuda.
Nag carvings at the temple to Parashar Rishi in the village of Kamand



At the Triyogi temple in Diyar, some older wood carvings of classical Hindu gods line the doorways and walls



Tilaks applied to the foreheads of the deities in prayer. These are forms of faith and respect to a higher power



At the Bijli Mahadev temple, carvings of characters in the scriptures line the temple walls and columns



A nag temple near Raison. Wood is considered sacred by the devout and many temples are beautifully carved out of the deodar tree



The recently carved door at the Markandey Rishi temple near Tharas

Modern Traditional Carvings

There is a scheme in Himachal to restore dilapidated structures both secular and sacred. Carving is an essential part of this process, and while the results vary, with some more refined than others, it is wonderful that these arts and crafts remain a living tradition. I have found it fascinating to watch the artisans at work: to listen to the rhythmic sound of their tools, and marvel at how they can produce intricate work with what seem to me to be fairly basic implements, for example, rather than a vice, wood is held between the craftsman's toes as he sculpts away!

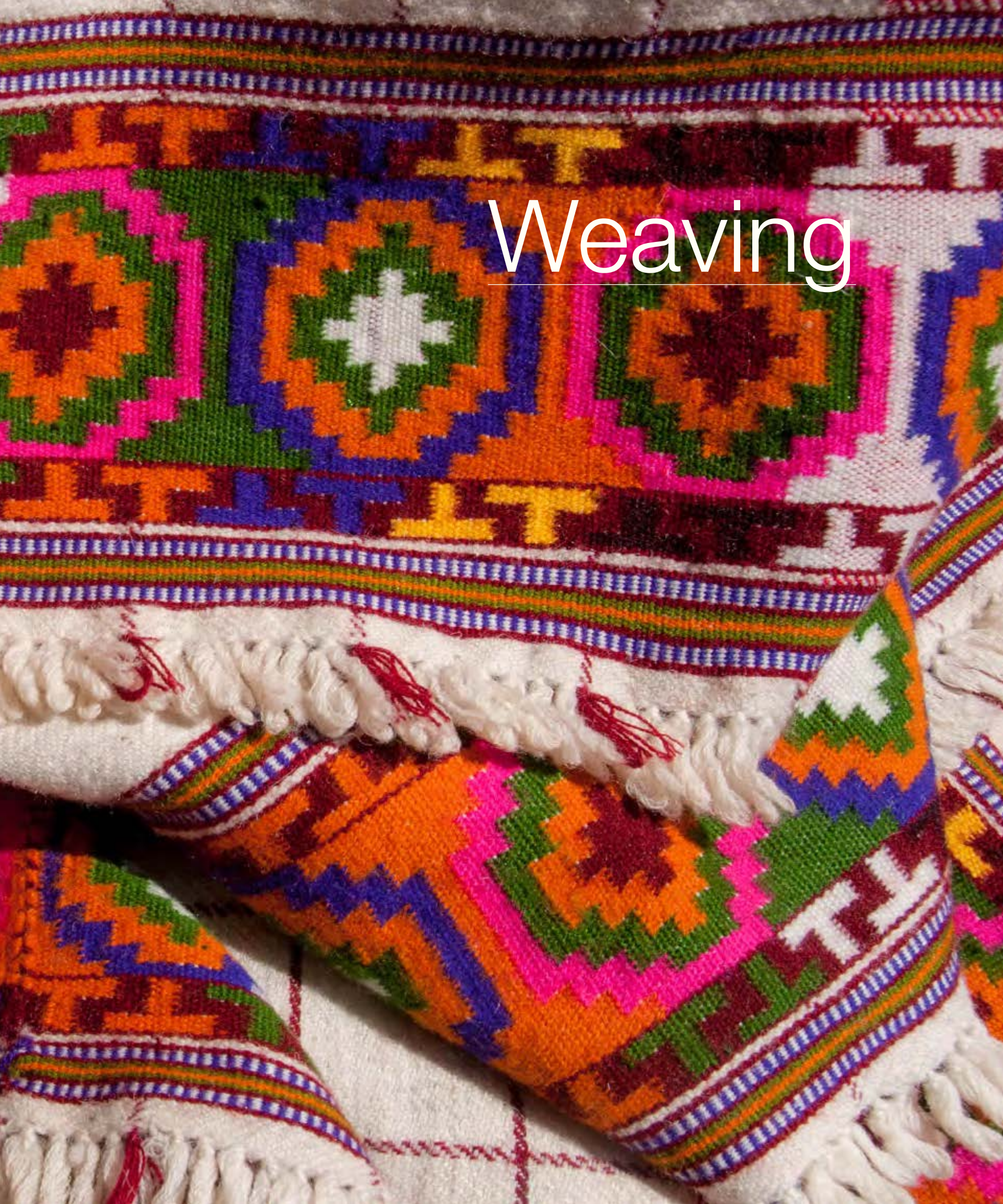
One of the successful restorations is the Markandey Rishi temple near Tharas. Markandey Rishi was born of a boon granted to his parents, Mrikandu and Marudmati, by Lord Shiv, and the young man also became a devotee of the god. The ornately carved doorway depicts a scene illustrating the rishi's devotion to Lord Shiv and is surrounded by well-executed customary motifs such as nagas, floral patterns, and chakras. It is typical of this fine tradition that along with the rishi and the nag devtas we find depictions of Vishnu, Saraswati, and Brahma—all is included in Oneness, nothing is not divine.



Temple newly constructed near Balyani



Weaving





Pattoos can vary in length and width. They are often stitched together in the centre, due to the limited width of the loom itself. The red border only on one side indicates that this is a half-width handloom

Weaving

Tana-Bana (Warp & Weft)

The Silk Road was the most famous of the trade routes across Asia, but there was also a smaller network of paths, tracks, and passes that connected the Punjab with Tibet and beyond, which was informally known as the Wool Road. As the name suggests, wool was one of the principal goods that was transported and the Kullu valley was one of the principal routes. As with the Silk Road, it was not only valuable goods that moved along these routes, but ideas, culture, and spiritual thought.

It is no surprise, then, that the 'Kullu shawls,' for which one sees signs all over the valley, have been influenced by Kullu's position on the Wool Road. The local people have probably woven wonderful woollen fabrics since sheep and goats were domesticated, but the distinctive Kullu cloth designs are relatively recent.

It seems likely that the distinctive combination of checks or plain colours with a vibrant border pattern comes from the melding of the plain traditional Kullu style with the highly patterned designs of nearby Kinnaur, also on one of the Wool Road routes. The Kinnauris, in their turn, probably took the idea of intricate patterns from their contact with Tibetans and the cloth they traded. Thus, the Wool Road brought new aesthetics from far afield, but the people of Kullu fused them into something fresh.

The unique technique of weaving in Kullu gives the finished product a distinctive appearance. Kullu shawls are easily distinguishable from their Kinnauri counterparts through the bold, bright, graphic-styled patterns of the borders. And I should add that the now widely used term 'Kullu shawls' freely includes other products such as mufflers, caps, scarves, and even carpets!

This expansion of 'Kullu shawls' to include almost anything woven is as a result of wool weaving, as an industry, having proliferated over the time I have lived here. Now handlooms can be seen almost everywhere you look, while walking



through the mountains as well as driving through town. The sounds of the shuttle passing through the warp strung on the loom and the glimpse of brightly coloured cloth in the making is a marvellous experience. The repetition of weaving is captivating and you can't help but stop and watch for a few minutes, hypnotized by the cloth that is unfolding in front of your vision.

Of all the products that come under 'Kullu shawls,' the one that fascinates me is the *pattoo*. A *pattoo* is a mountain blanket traditionally worn by local women all year round. (Men also are seen with a *pattoo* stylishly thrown over one shoulder in the winter months while out on an excursion through the mountains. However, in the towns, one doesn't see the *pattoo* worn as much anymore by either sex.) It offers both warmth in the winter months, as well as insulation from the summer heat. Colours vary according to the imagination of the weaver, although bright hues are generally preferred. Traditionally, *pattoos* have a black or white base within which red lines and a variety of floral and geometric patterns in other colours are created.



The pedals at the base of the loom, operated by the weaver's feet, determine the plain or diamond weave base of the cloth

The two parts of woven cloth are, of course, the warp and the weft, which are called in Kullu the *tana* and the *bana*. For a pattoo, the tana is created first by winding threads of yarn between two poles. The length is decided on and the poles are sunk into the ground an appropriate distance apart. If the loom is narrow, then once two pieces are woven they will be stitched together to form the full width. A meticulous count of all the threads must be kept in order to maintain regularity in the pattern when it is being woven.



Next, it is time to dress the loom. Dressing the loom is the art of threading the long vertical tana threads on to a horizontal frame. The warp threads are passed through needle-like flat metal loops *rach* (called heddles in English) fixed on the frame. The rach keep each thread of the tana separate as the bana is woven between them. This is a painstaking process that takes many hours, but, as with most activities in these hills, it is accompanied by many mountain stories and much laughter and the time flies by.



A meticulous count of threads is essential for a regular pattern.
Threading the loom takes time and patience

Skilled weavers draw inspiration for the design from their beautiful mountain environment as well as local mythology and folk motifs. And once a pattern is decided upon, the weaving begins.

The shuttle is the instrument that holds the weft as it is passed through the warp. Foot pedals are used to create a base pattern, commonly a diamond or even a plain weave. The gentle sound of the shuttle passing through threads of wool, the pedals changing the upper and lower strand of yarn, and the comb-like press is so pleasing. There is always chit-chat going on in the background. And when you pick up a finished hand-woven Kullu pattoo, even if you don't know the history behind the patterns, you immediately have the sense of the lovely environment in which it was created.



Weaving requires constant counting to determine the correct pattern



Taken off the loom, ends must be knotted to finish off the shawl



Pattoo, typical mountain dress, woven in traditional Kullu colours and patterns. The red border, seen mostly on pattoos, is called a khusti



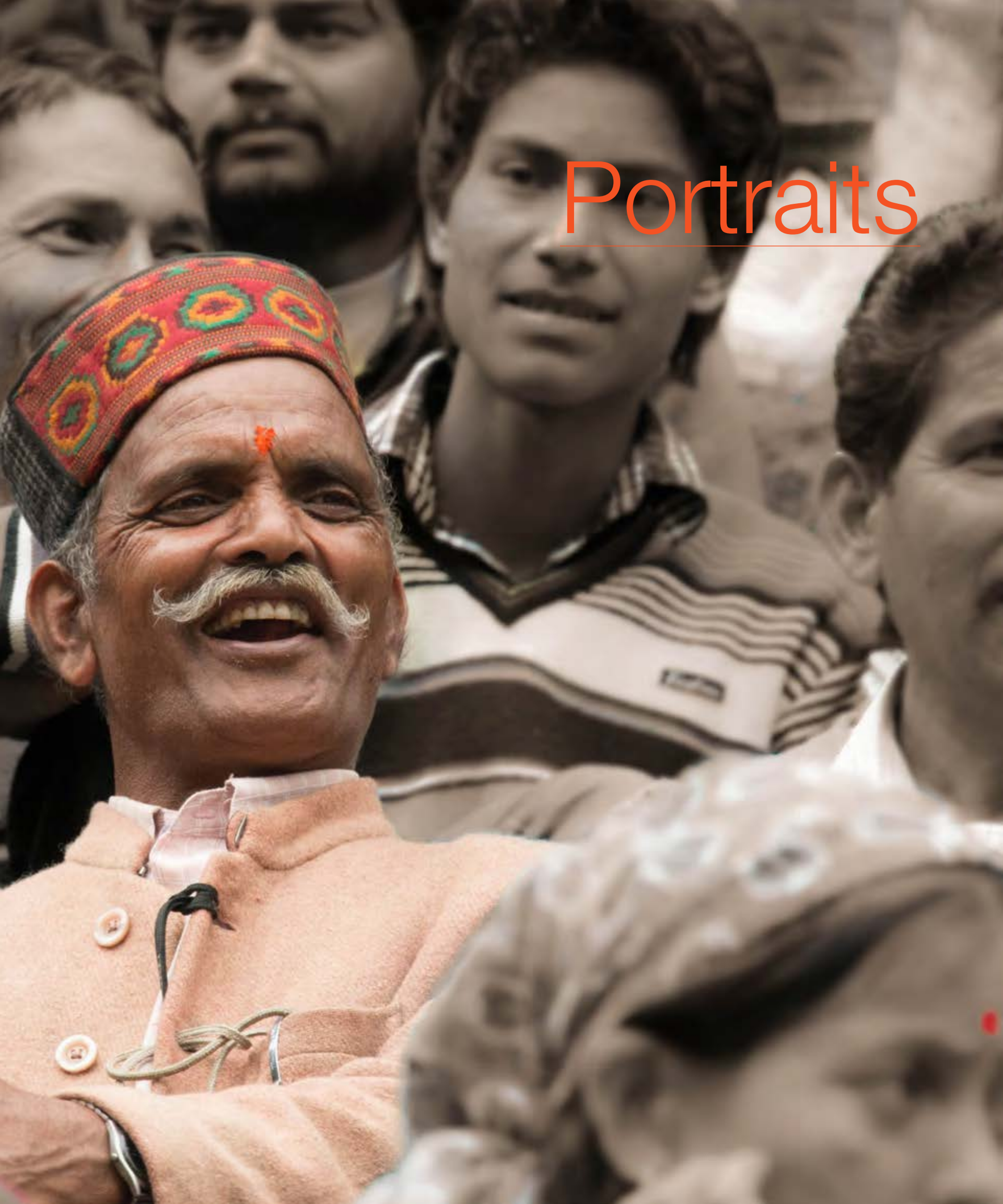
Borders are both incorporated in the shawl itself as well as woven separately on very narrow looms







Portraits





Swami Shyam

Portraits

Throughout the ages, the Himalayas have been home to saints and sages. Many sacred texts were composed in these mountains and many of the customs, practices, and rituals prescribed in them are still preformed to this day.

Wherever I have been in Kullu, I have felt the respect and devotion for the holy knowledge and great wisdom that has been uncovered in these hills and valleys. At the same time, the vast variety of people who have settled here pursue a simple lifestyle of living close to nature. But you only have to look at the lines on their faces, as I often do through a camera lens, to see this is not an easy life they have chosen, and, although they are usually in good spirits, they are often subject to hardships.

A photographic portrait is literally the reflection of light exhibited on film (or nowadays a digital sensor). However, the photographer's intent is to show not just the face of a person but also their personality or specific mood. In order to capture that feeling in a split second, the photographer must choose the exact moment to release the shutter. But the mood that seems to be caught is personal: the subject and viewer of the photograph may have a very different impression than the photographer's original concept. Each and every human being sees according to his or her own idea, concept, or mood. This is what interpretation is all about, but still as a photographer my task is to bring out that sense of the remarkable in everyone I photograph.

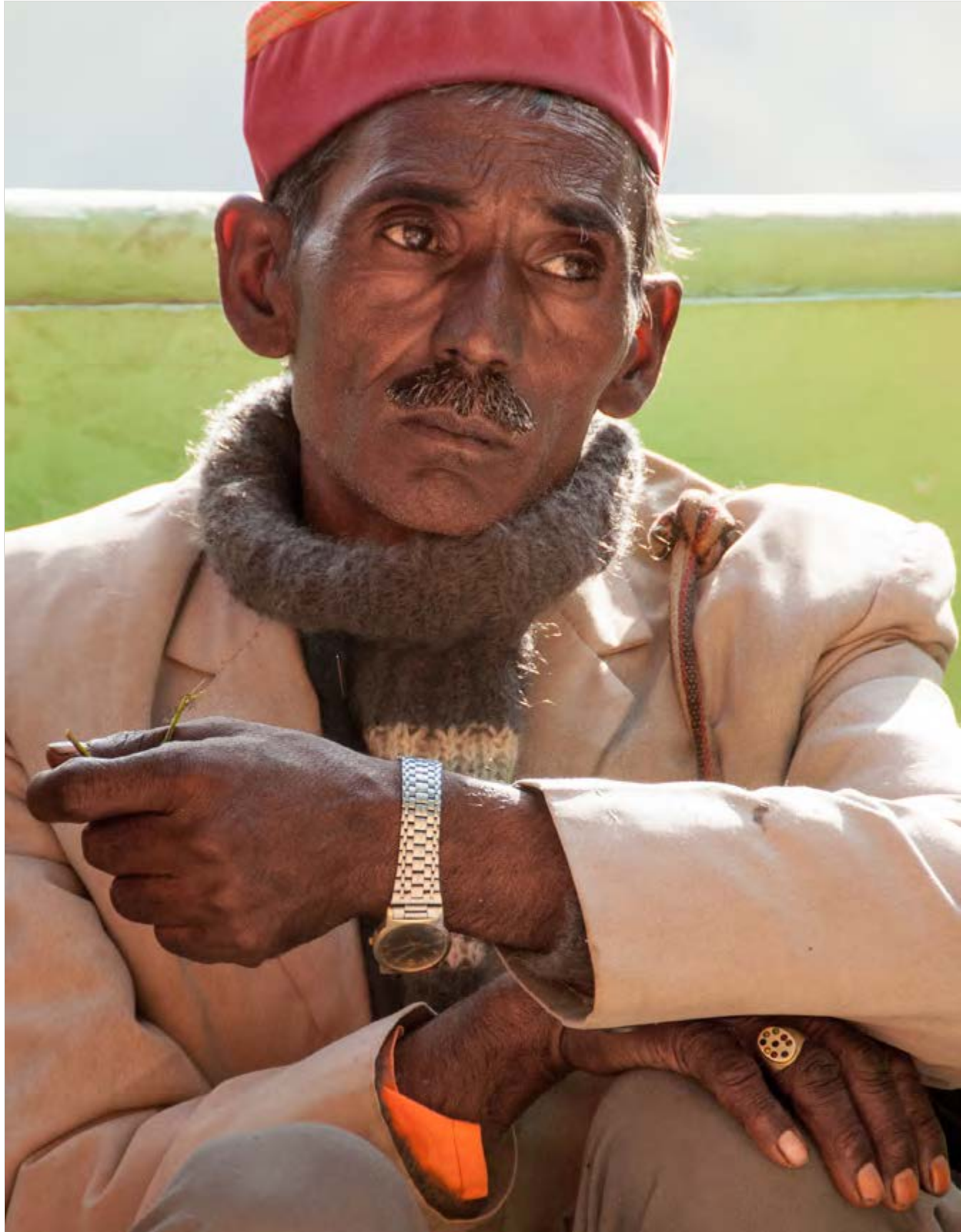
I hope I have succeeded in conveying something of the unique people of Himachal Pradesh. I love their unusual clothes—the women's headscarves and men's Kullu caps worn to protect them from the high-altitude sun, and the *pattoos*, or mountain blankets, to keep out the cold—and the delicate, traditional jewellery that adorns the women and brings out their simple beauty. I'm equally fascinated by their day-to-day lives: the plowing and farming, the animal herding, the basket weaving, the weddings and food cooked at festivals—by all the scenes that come before me.

The photographer is the Seer of the Scene. Her camera is the tool through which the manifest life can be recorded and portrayed. And once captured, the Scene can again be enjoyed by the same Seer—through many different pairs of eyes.



Diwali—the festival of lights





Devotee of the devta Chyavan Rishi en route to the Dusshera fair



Malanese folk dancer wearing a traditional pattoo fastened with silver pins, at the Sharhi fair in Naggar



A young mountain girl attending a marriage. Mehndi, henna, is applied in different designs on the hands of friends of the bride in celebration of the marriage



Green-eyed basket weaver in Paha Nala



The pastoral Gaddi tribe of shepherds lead a migratory life, bringing their flocks up to the high Himalayan pastures in the summer and back down south for the cold Himachal winters





Weathered from a life of hardship, Tibetan refugees have found a home in the Kullu valley



In order to grind flour from their wheat crop, each village has a water mill. As with many agricultural facilities, they are constructed and used by all in the village



Young boy offering a flower

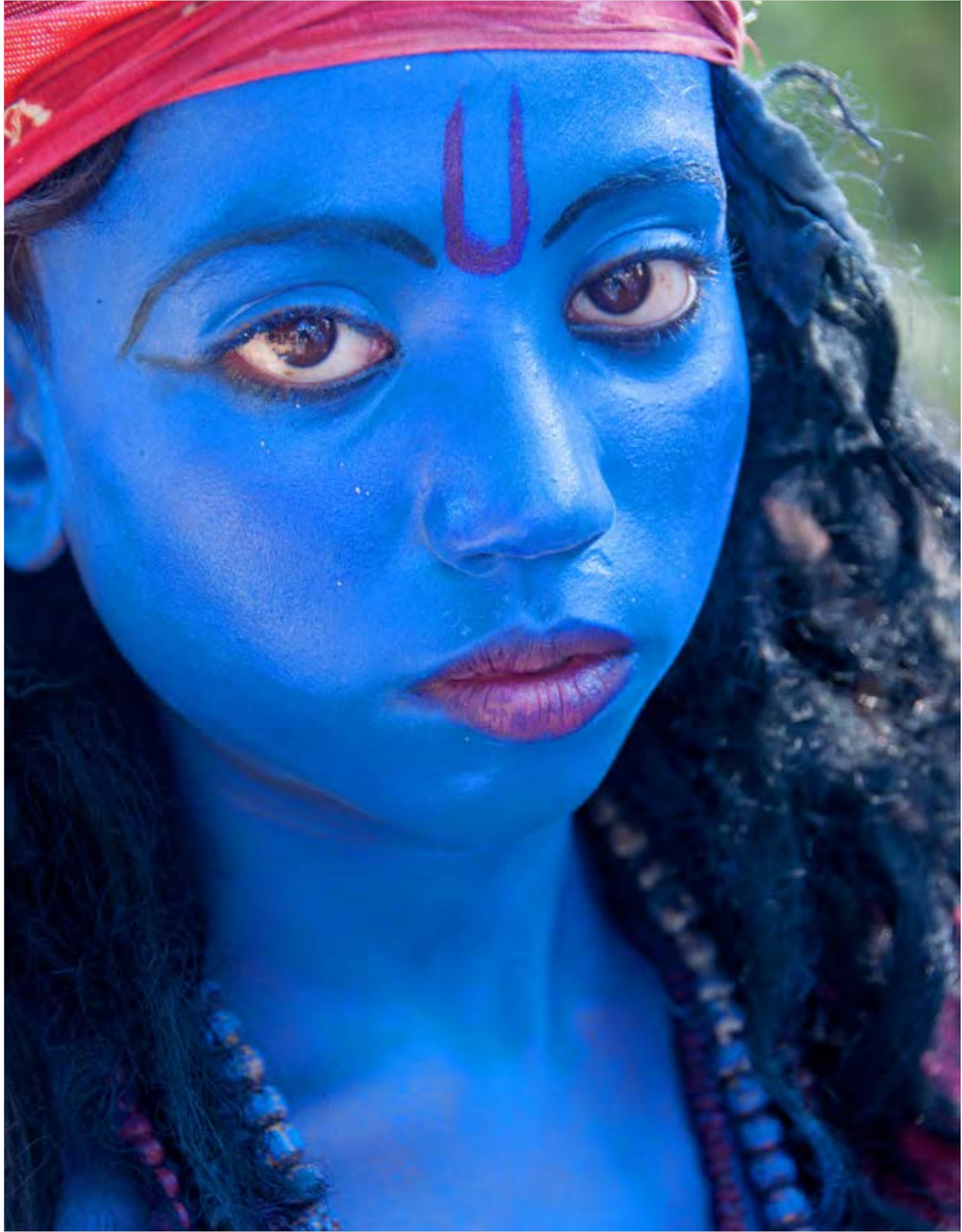


Children are children—universally





Cow... boy



Imagery of the gods—collecting alms



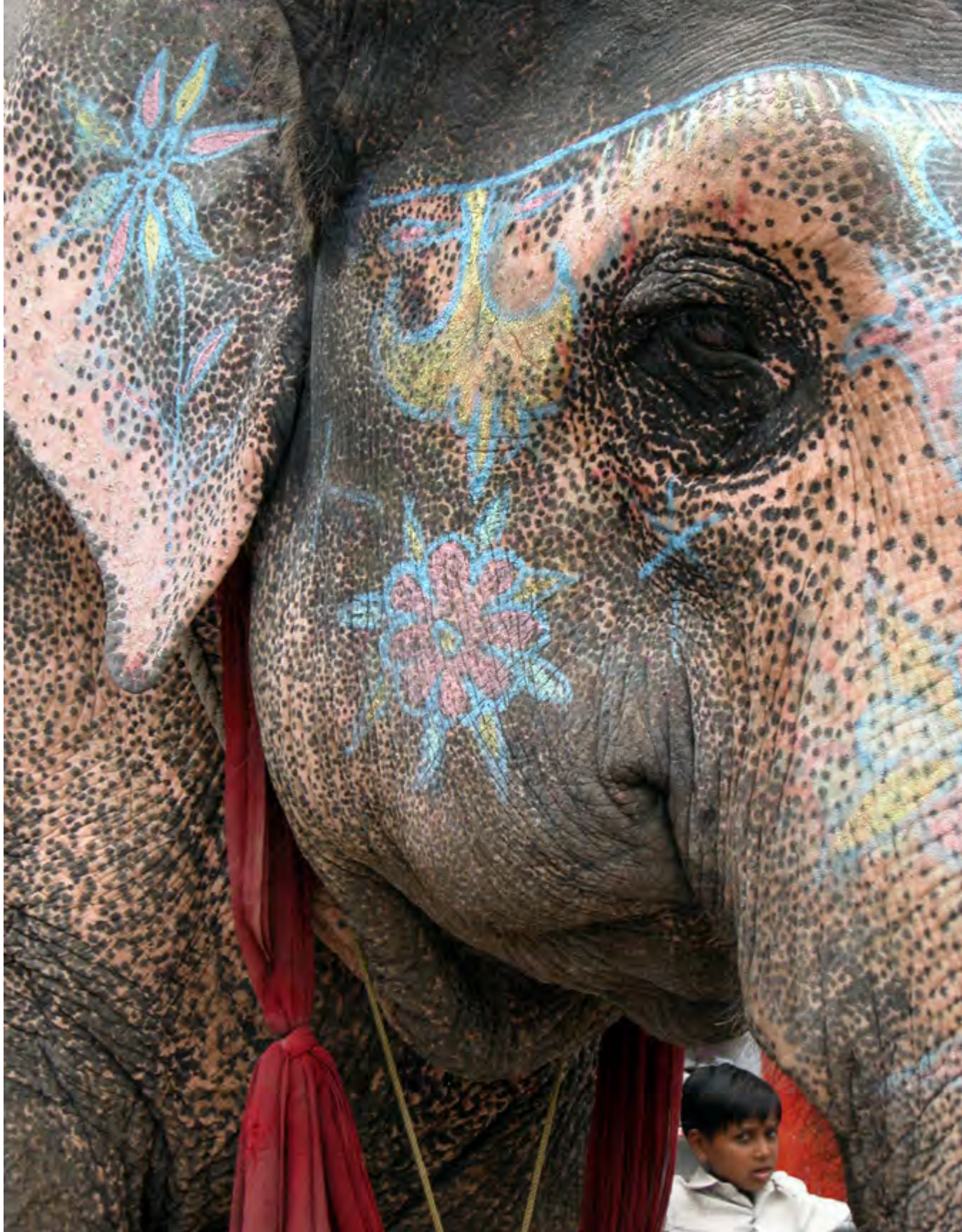
I beg of you



Comfort



Serious



Elephant... boy



Baba Balak Nath, ever colourful



Ashok is known to have the best jalebis (a traditional Indian sweet) in Kullu



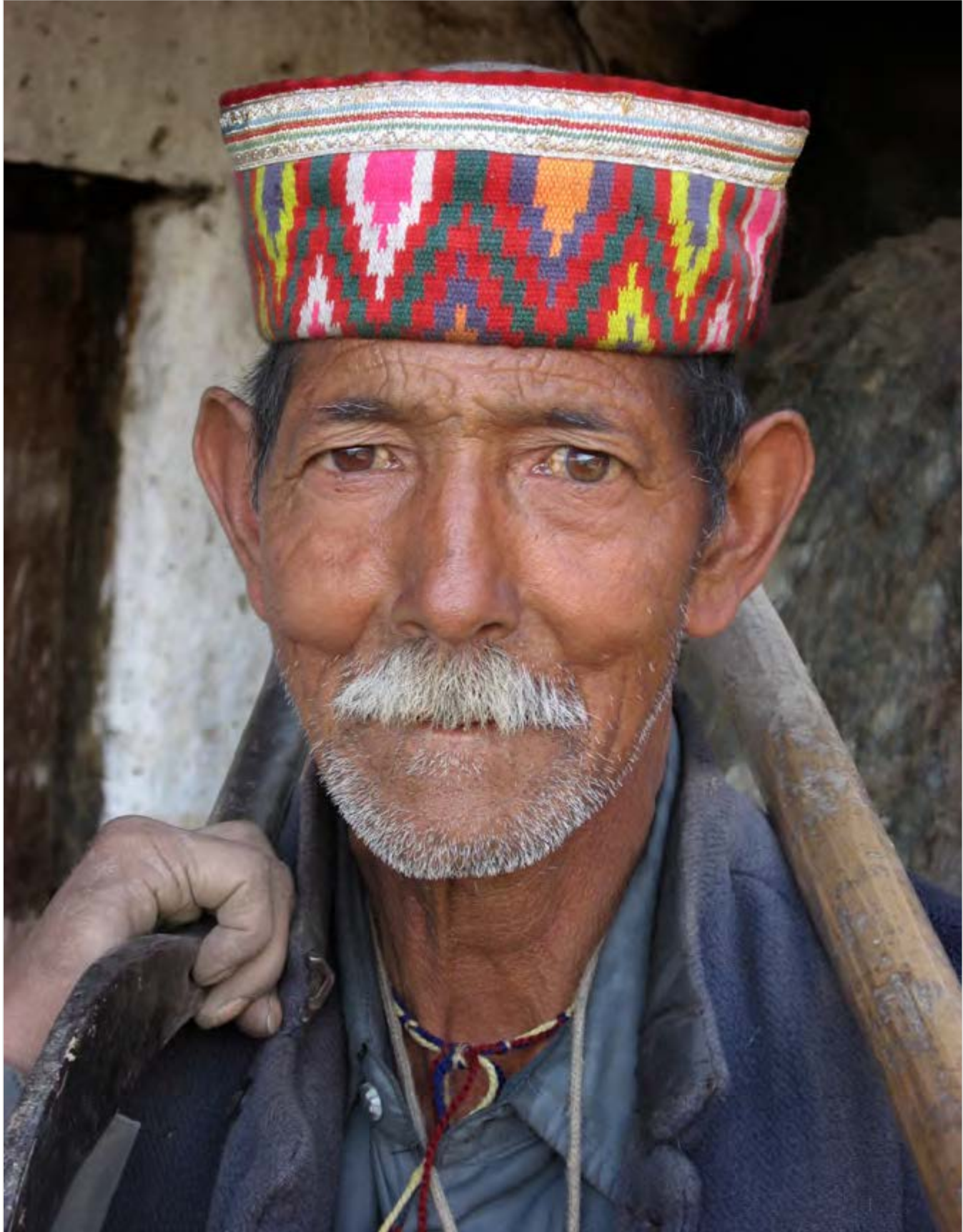
Tailor-made



Taking a moment's rest



Pullas, hemp shoes, colourfully embroidered on display at a local crafts fair



A traditional Kullu mountain man on his way back from plowing the fields, carrying a sickle and part of his wooden plow



Kamla in traditional pattoo, headscarf, nose rings, and earrings



Hands delicately painted with mehndi, henna, at a marriage party



Family members at a marriage party

Village elder at her typical mountain house in the village of Lot







Planting rice is women's work, plowing the fields is for the men (next page)



The people are very good natured despite the hardships of mountain living







Landscapes





Pandoh—gateway to the Kullu valley

Landscape

Human beings have very diverse ideas, preferences, and tastes. Some like to live near the ocean with its crashing waves. Others choose the dry desert with its subtle pastel charms. For me, it is the mountains!

The earth's peaks elevate my spirits and bring a great sense of rapture. It is something about the altitude, the drama, and the constant wonder of what awaits around the corner.

All the elements of nature work to create the breathtaking scenery. The earth provides the raw materials. The rivers are like craftsmen, carving out the landscape as the forests of trees stand and watch. From the blue sky, the fiery sun casts its light over the mountains through the day. Patterns are projected on the opposite mountainside tracing the shape of peaks, and evolving new shapes as the sun goes down. Each day, yet another original display. It is a dance of light and shade, and its beauty is forever new.

It is in the height of these mountains that I experience
the Seer Seeing the Scene as
ONE



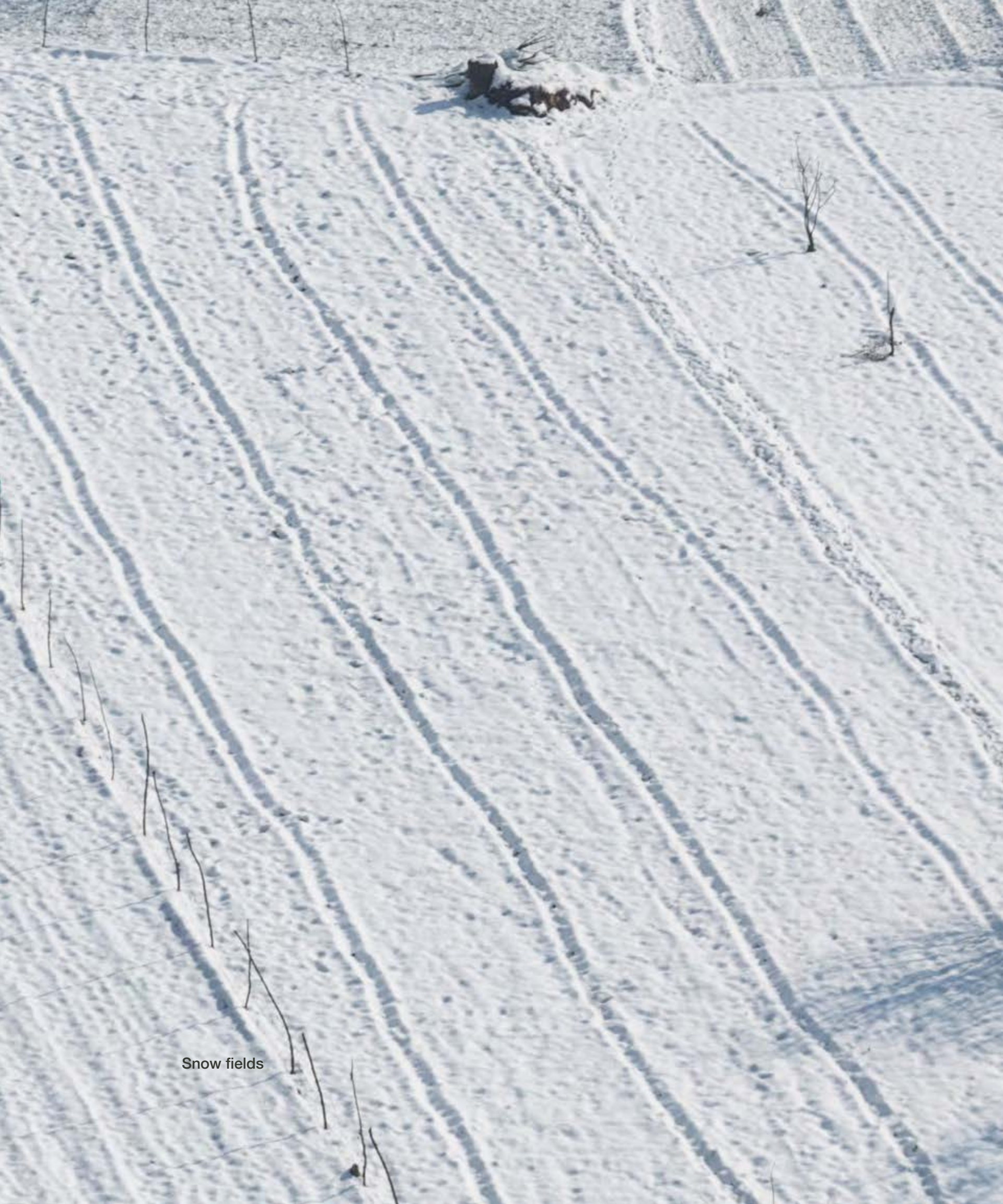
Colour is the constituent of light





Sunset





Snow fields



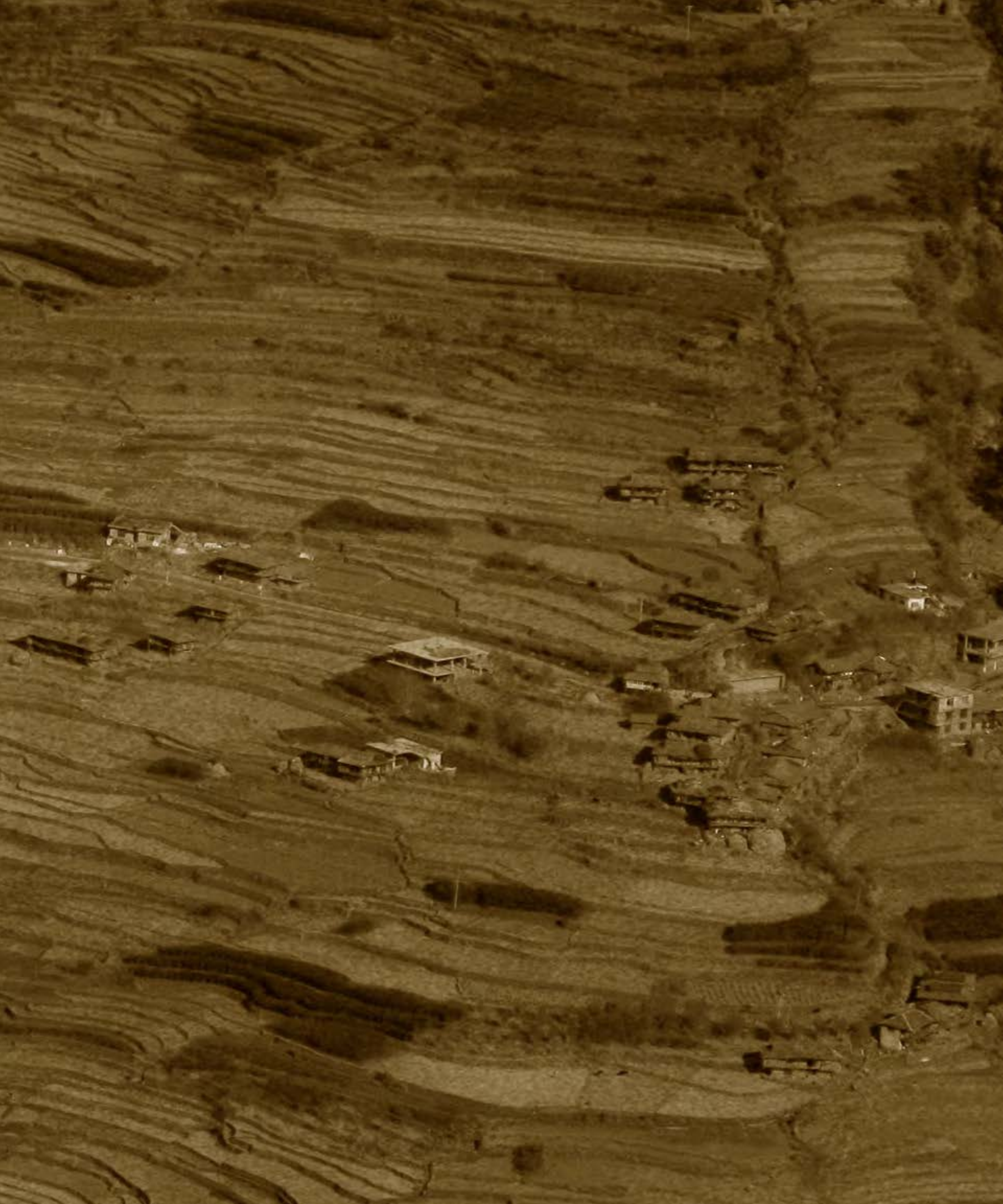


View from Naggar Castle





Gompa at Kais





Burning fire to bring rain





Himalayas









