The Sacred and Its Adaptation: Negotiating Folklore and Scriptural Authority

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Abstract: Change and adaptation, often believed to be necessary for continuity and survival, also serve as tools of erasure. For smaller cultures and communities, change rarely comes on its own terms. Instead, it is a guise under which dominant systems impose themselves, rebranding assimilation as evolution and loss as "necessary progress." In the name of adaptation, languages disappear, rituals are abandoned, and identities are subsumed. In the realm of the sacred, these adaptive processes often manifest in how belief systems are reinterpreted, retold, and restructured to align with dominant narratives or contemporary sensibilities. In the Indian Western Himalayas, adaptations, cultural and ritualistic, have been evident in the prominent Institution of Divinity, the localised, sacred tradition of *devi-devta* worship. In the state of Himachal Pradesh, the systems of oral worship are being subject to adaptation under the weight of script-oriented Hinduism, tourism and state-sanctioned religious homogenization.

Rooted in animistic, ecological and performative worldviews, these traditions have long operated outside the bounds of canonical Hindu scriptures. However, in contemporary times, an increasing trend can be observed in which local deities are reimagined as *avatars* of pan-Indian gods, oral myths are scripted to conform to *Puranic* narratives, and indigenous rituals are either "sanitised" or supplanted by institutionalised temple practices. This paper approaches these shifts through the lens of Adaptation Studies, particularly focusing on how these sacred traditions are selectively transformed and recontextualized. Through case studies, the research focuses on analysing how adaptation plays out in narrative, ritual, spatial and performative dimensions. The study is an attempt to highlight the contested negotiations between scriptural authority and local ritual agency, between preservation and transformation. The analysis intends to reveal how adaptation involves complex acts of cultural translation, resistance and hybridity.

Keywords: Adaptation Studies; Sacred Traditions; Devi-Devta Worship; Cultural Erasure; Religious Homogenization; Scriptural Authority; Himachal Pradesh

In the study of any culture, a primary concern is understanding how cultural identity is negotiated within the framework of hegemonic pressures exerted upon it. Since each society is marked by numerous small divisions, this is reflected in its multifarious cultural expressions. As Robert Redfield explains in *Peasant Society and Culture*, culture is shaped by two interrelated forces: the "Little Traditions" and the "Great Tradition." The interaction between cultural identity and hegemonic structures is visible in the encounters between these traditions, the "little" traditions, which are localized, community-specific practices and the one "Great" Tradition, which is a mainstream, codified, pan-regional, religious or elite framework. The interplay of these traditions has been further theorized under the concept of acculturation, which captures the dynamics of cultural contact, transformation, adaptation and resistance (Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 149).

Acculturation has often been misrepresented as a linear process moving in a single direction, in which the 'subordinate' tradition is gradually absorbed into the dominant tradition. However, recent scholarship, as emphasised by Bhabha, argues the same, instead positing that encounters between two cultures are not merely about assimilation but become sites of negotiation, hybridity and identity reconstruction. The adaptation of little traditions to a Great Tradition does not then, necessarily comprise a complete erasure of the former's cultural identity; rather, it involves a dialectical process where elements of the 'Great' tradition are also selectively appropriated, resisted, and thus reinterpreted to sustain and to a certain extent reshape existing identities of both.

This process delves into the complex intricacies of power relations and deals with questions of hegemony. Drawing from Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, the incorporation of local practices into mainstream frameworks can be understood as a mechanism for 'manufacturing consent' and redistributing cultural capital (Bourdieu 243). Yet, the 'subordinate' position of little traditions also allows for forms of agency, which also in exchange, allow them to subtly transform the Great

Tradition, further creating hybrid cultural forms that challenge the notion of fixed dichotomies between the "local" and the "universal" (Guha 6; Ortner 175).

These complex dynamics of cultural assimilation and identity transformation are evident in the customs and ceremonies of the sacred *nag devtas* in select regions of the Sangla Valley in the Western Himalayas. The cultural paraphernalia there is a living testimony to how little traditions negotiate their relationship with the Great Tradition, and how such negotiations contribute to wider questions of cultural continuity, change and hybridization.

In the Indian Western Himalayas, sacred traditions are deep-rooted in ecological spaces, oral transmission and performative practices. These constitute a vital cultural foundation and define the lived experiences and belief systems of various little traditions found within the region. Here, the sacred institution of *devi-devta* worship emerges as a dynamic embodiment of localized cosmologies and community life, but these are little traditions which are not isolated from broader mainstream religious forces. Increasingly, processes of state-led religious homogenization, the expansion of tourism economies and the influence of scriptural Hindu frameworks are reshaping the meanings and practices surrounding local deities. Such transformations highlight the tension between scriptural beliefs and lived experiences, and continuity and change, as indigenous religious systems are being forced to adapt to shifting cultural and political contexts.

The valleys of Himachal Pradesh are filled with numerous such little traditions, one of which can be found in the Sangla Valley in Kinnaur district. The valley is home to a *devta* known as *Bering Nag*, whose sanctity exemplifies both resilience and contestation in the face of mainstream religious pressures. Venerated as the patron deity of the valley, he is associated with ecological balance, protection and even martial authority. *Bering Nag*, therefore, occupies a central position in local identity and ritual practice.

Based on interviews, it has been noted that *Bering Nag*, a *nag* deity, is not always in the local narratives, a serpent, but is believed to have the body of a deer and the head of a bird (Himalayan Monal) whose powers are tied to water, fertility and the rhythms of agriculture. His worship echoes

a broader ecological Himalayan pattern in which indigenous *devis* and *devtas* are understood as guardians of fields, rivers and weather, and as protectors of communities from ecological imbalance. The stories about his origins are multifarious and have been preserved through folklore for centuries. As is the nature of orality, these narratives and his place in the wider sacred order do not follow an esoteric singular linearity; rather is a multifaceted domain wherein the narratives shift depending upon the "gaze" that is delineating it, the local folk narratives, or narratives that have recently merged him into the Puranic pantheon of scriptural Hinduism.

Among the locals, folk memory not only describes the arrival of *Bering Nag* but also the creation of the valley settlement. This has been preserved through *chirani*, the oral "history of the deity," which is performed before any major event or ritual takes place, with divine power believed to have entered the body of a medium ("*groakh"* in Kinnauri). One such account recalls his migration from Uttarakhand into the upper valleys of Himachal. Travelling downward from a lake in Kashmir, *Bering Nag* is first said to have established his home along with his seven brothers, five sisters, and their mother at Baural, (Uttarakhand) a high-altitude point marked by a large pond. Baural, till date, remains a site of pilgrimage for his followers, who recount how the deity "took his seat" there and regained his powers, turning the place into a centre of his authority. The narration of this history continues in ritual practice, when divine power manifests, the *groakh* throws off his cap and speaks in the first person as the deity, recounting his origins and announcing his presence. This is how both myth and history are interwoven, and the deity's ties to the landscape are renewed through lived experience such as this.

At the same time, additions to this tale also embed *Bering Nag* within the broader scriptural order of Hinduism. In these more recent versions, his genealogy begins with *Brahma* and his son *Marichi*, and extends to the myth of *Kadru* and *Vinata*, the co-wives whose rivalry gave birth to the *nags* and the *garudas,* according to scriptural Hinduism. Through this lineage, *Bering Nag* is linked primarily to *Sheshnag*, as the Great Serpent of the Sanskritic tradition. His role in such narratives is one that has been followed since times immemorial: as *Sheshnag*, he supports *Vishnu*, as *Lakshman*,

he accompanies *Ram* in the Ramayan, as *Balram*, he appears as *Krishna's* elder brother in the *Mahabharat,* and here in Sangla, according to some individuals, he has come in support of *Buddha*, who they believe is an incarnation of *Vishnu*. This story is further followed by *Krishna's* allocation of territories to the gods at the close of the *Dwapar Yuga*, situating *Bering Nag* and his family within Kashmir before their eventual migration southward into the Western Himalayas. This adaptation of indigenous narratives and rituals to the scriptural, Sanskritic texts is a form of Sanskritization, as M. N. Srinivas elaborates in his work, *Social Change in Modern India* ". . . Sanskritization is not confined to Hindu castes but also occurs among tribal and semitribal groups such as the . . . *Pahadis* of the Himalayas" (7).

The coexistence of these narrative strands, the place-bound records of the *Chirani* centred on Baural, and the Puranic genealogy connecting him to *Vishnu's avatars*, highlights the layered and dynamic nature of mythmaking. Local accounts emphasize the creation of the valley and its people, ecological guardianship and kinship with the land, thus it is evident that such local lores are representative of a limited space, while scriptural versions mould the deity into the wider scriptural Hindu order, intending to establish the deity as part of a 'greater' Sanskritic tradition, thus seeking assimilation with the Great tradition. The first degree of Sanskritization, then, can be found in the new narratives of the deity's origin that root his identity within the scriptural Hindu framework. But this is not unidirectional acculturation with the local being forgotten; rather, one notes that the local, space-bound lore doesn't try to resolve cosmic interrogations, unlike the mainstream, which is 'determined' to resolve the cosmic mystery through a single narrative. This, in turn, presents a very significant characteristic of the indigenous: their acceptance of variety and acknowledgement of it as legitimate entities worthy of respect, just like their own. The two belief systems, the local, place-bound narratives and the homogenising, mainstream narratives, also circulate within the same communities, often overlapping in narratives; together, they reveal how Himalayan traditions negotiate narratives between localised cosmologies and dominant religious frameworks, reshaping both in the process.

The local belief system has uniquely preserved the *devtas'* individuality through ritual practices, and it is here that the second degree of Sanskritization can be observed. Traditionally, *Bering Nag* has been venerated through oral hymns, preserved in an ancient language, distinct from the modern Kinnauri dialect, that only a handful of people can now understand, and through local dances and elaborate festivals, the most prominent being the organization of numerous fairs and festivals in the temple premises throughout the year. These rituals are community affairs which bind the people of the valley through participation in processions, masked performances and offerings that correspond to the cycles of agriculture and the rhythms of the seasons. An example of a uniquely local festival exclusive to the region and the valley is the celebration of *Phulaich* (the Festival of Flowers), where people collect flowers from nearby regions to honour their ancestors as well as their *devta*. In some cases it has been noted that the celebration of mainstream festivals has also gained prominence in the region, for instance the Holi of Sangla has recently been in the headlines across the country, but this celebration varies from its mainstream versions of Mathura and Vrindavan as the festival in Sangla always begins in the temple complex and the highlight of the event is the local theatrical production which includes neither the genealogy of *Krishna* nor renditions of his *Raasleela*. Such festivities and celebrations carry strong associations linking the ritual life of the valley to both natural cycles and broader North Indian festival calendars. In the valley, then, even mainstream festivals are never simple repetitions of pan-Indian patterns; they retain the local beliefs, emphasising reciprocity with the *devta* and the land.

A significant tradition connected to *Bering Nag* is the story of his victory over a demonic serpent and its sister, both of whom threatened the valley's prosperity. Oral accounts recall how, after a fierce battle, *Bering Nag* subdued the demon and restored balance, ensuring agricultural fertility and security for his people. The event is commemorated annually through *Budi Diwali*, a regional festival that takes place a month after the mainstream Diwali.

While its name has undergone reinterpretation across generations, *Budi Diwali* in Sangla bears little resemblance to the pan-Indian Diwali associated with the return of Ram from his exile and the

lighting of *diyas* as a means of illuminating households, symbolically establishing the victory of light over darkness. Instead, it is a distinctly local event characterized by ritual performances, collective dance and offerings dedicated to the memory of *Bering Nag*'s victory over the demonic serpents. These practices affirm the deity's dual role as both protector and warrior within the community's cultural imagination. The later renaming of the festival, however, has reinforced a parallel misconception that the delay in receiving news of Ram's return to Ayodhya accounts for the festival's observance at a later date in this remote region.

The sacred order of Sangla Valley is not limited to *Bering Nag* alone. Local belief also emphasises that the valley is home to numerous *devis* and *devtas*, some demonic in nature, each with their own domains, tied down and controlled by *Bering Nag* for their own good and the people's welfare. According to the people, these deities live in mutual respect and peaceful coexistence, only demanding some offerings from time to time. *Bering Nag* himself is thought to have several brothers who preside over different regions of the Western Himalayas, creating a divine kinship network that extends beyond Sangla. What sets him apart from the scriptural narrative that identifies him simply with *Sheshnag* is precisely this web of localized connections, to place, to other deities such as *Kamru devta*, *Badri Vishal devta* and to the people of the valley.

The rituals dedicated to him are also characterized by secrecy. A large number of rituals, especially those performed during major festivals inside the temple's inner precincts, are considered too sacred to be publicly displayed or explained to outsiders. This secrecy serves to preserve the autonomy of local traditions in the face of external pressures.

This cultural uniqueness, despite its resilience, has, over the past few decades in particular, become a victim of a trend toward ritual adaptation dictated by scriptural authority. Processes of "Scripturalization" have begun to alter the religious landscape. Local hymns and invocations are supplemented or even replaced by recitations from Sanskrit texts. The movement toward sanitisation is consistently discouraging older offerings such as animal sacrifices and liquor, integral to festivals and rituals, instead forcing the replacement of them with vegetarian foods and "orthodox" practices

designed to align with state policies, tourism sensibilities and mainstream Hindu ideals. In his temple at Sangla, *Bering Nag* himself is now declared as a 'pure' vegetarian, even though the diet of people in the region is largely non-vegetarian, and even the old ritual cycles reflect this dietary reality. In the process, the specific little culture becomes alien to the very people it once belonged to, further altering the identity of the group. The culture, which was supposed to be the representation of the lives of the people, then moves away from their experiences and becomes distant and abstract.

Institutional reforms have significantly reshaped the sacred order of the hillfolk. Temple committees, often guided by mainstream, scriptural Hindu organisations, now oversee many rituals, gradually displacing hereditary custodians who once preserved oral traditions, performative practices and specialised ritual knowledge. The decline of caste-based restrictions, particularly following their legal prohibition, has also restructured ritual hierarchies. Rules that once determined access to temple spaces or ritual roles are steadily eroding. This shift has, on the one hand, enabled wider participation across social groups, but on the other hand, it has weakened older forms of ritual authority and unsettled customary channels through which knowledge was passed down.

Altogether, these shifts reveal a complex process of change, adaptation and negotiation. On one hand, *Bering Nag* remains rooted in Sangla's local cosmology, remembered through secret rituals, kinship with other deities and festivals like *Budi Diwali* that commemorate his unique mythological victories. On the other hand, the pressure of Sanskritization, where indigenous *devis* and *devtas* along with rituals are being 'purified' and homogenized with the mainstream scriptural beliefs, and state-driven "modernization" continue to reshape his worship in line with pan-Indian religious forms. The contemporary moment is shaped by a tension between local traditions and external forces of homogenization. Adaptation in this context is never neutral; it becomes a contested space where continuity, erasure, and transformation unfold simultaneously.

The temple and its complex, wherein Sangla *Bering Nag* resides, are also examples of the third degree of Sanskritization, and their study shows how spatial and architectural transformations embody cultural adaptation. Traditionally, temples in the region have been constructed in the *Kath-*

Kuni style, an indigenous Himalayan method which uses wood and stone interlinked together without mortar or cement. This architecture was not just practical, as it suited the seismic zones and harsh mountain climates, but was also symbolic. On the carved wooden panels, one could see motifs carved from local cosmologies, featuring hybrid figures; in the case of the *Bering Nag* temple, such as a deer with the head of a Monal, alongside floral patterns and carvings of protective spirits linked to the valley's ecology, which came to shape in oral descriptions that had been passed down generations. Modest in scale yet closely attuned to its surroundings, the temple's form expressed the community's bond with both the *devi-devtas* and the landscape.

In recent decades, however, successive renovations have altered the visual language of the temple. Increasingly, concrete is used in construction, while ornate carvings and decorative facades have been introduced to bring the structure in line with North Indian temple styles. The new carvings, no longer focus exclusively on local imagery or agrarian motifs but prominently feature figures from the mainstream Hindu pantheon, such as *Vishnu*, *Lakshmi*, *Durga* and other gods familiar to pilgrims from the plains. Iconography that once reflected the localized traditions and cosmologies is gradually disappearing or being reinterpreted through the idiom of scriptural Hinduism.

This architectural shift parallels the broader processes of religious homogenization. As the temple becomes a destination for outsiders, tourists, pilgrims and state officials, its visual presentation is adapted to be legible within a national religious framework. To those unfamiliar with Himalayan traditions, carvings of *Vishnu* or *Durga* signify orthodoxy and legitimacy, aligning the temple with the wider networks of Hindu worship across India. Yet in achieving this recognizability, the temple simultaneously loses aspects of its distinct identity as a seat of a local *nag devta*. The architectural language of *Kath-Kuni*, with its embedded ecological knowledge and indigenous symbolism, is overshadowed by an aesthetic associated with urban temples of the plains, which have been accepted by the script-oriented generations, furthering the establishment of the 'true' religious narrative, which has no space for the sacred entities of the little traditions and communities.

The transformation of temple space is not merely on a modern, aesthetic basis, but also carries implications for ritual practice. Where once the temple itself was a repository of local myths and ecological memory, its wooden carvings narrating the *devtas'* guardianship of the valley, new iconographies recast the site within the theological framework of the 'Great Tradition.' An example of this can be understood through the act of placing *Vishnu's* image or idol alongside or even above representations of *Bering Nag*. This would precisely reorder the hierarchy of the divine powers, situating the local *devta* within the shadow of a pan-Indian one. This has been observed across the land and temples of Nepal, where *nags*, once believed to be the original owners of land and the guardians of their people, have now been removed from the centre and made to stand outside, guarding the gates of scriptural Hindu gods. The physical form of the temple thus stands as a material record of the pressures of Sanskritization, the quest for visibility, acceptance and the ongoing struggle to maintain local cosmologies within an increasingly homogenized, national, religious landscape.

Much like in Nepal, the oral narratives of *Bering Nag* that had once been transmitted in local dialects and kept secret, performed within community gatherings, are increasingly being re-scripted into mainstream versions that align with scriptural Hindu narratives. This would, with the passage of time, force the erasure of all folklore that portrays him as the creator and guardian *devta* of the Sangla valley. With this erasure comes a shift in authority, as certain mainstream versions of the narrative will be preserved while others are silenced and pushed to the margins. The agency of storytellers, mediums and performers is thus weakened when narratives move from lived experiences, dynamic, oral contexts into concrete textual forms, especially when that textualisation is flawed and corrupted by the pressures of Sanskritization. Textualization, rather than ensuring preservation, then, reduces the inherent dynamic nature and plurality of oral traditions to a singular, authoritative script.

While the pressure of Sanskritization and homogenization is evident in the case of *Bering Nag*, it also shows that adaptation does not simply take the form of unidimensional assimilation. Local communities continue to exercise their ritual agency even when narratives are being recast in the mould of script-oriented Hinduism. The locals hold onto practices that bind the *devta* to the ecological

and agrarian rhythms of the valley. Hybrid modes of worship are emerging, in which traditional dances, processions, rituals, and oral hymns coexist with *Puranic* practices introduced by external actors. *Puranic* associations are employed strategically, where *Bering Nag*'s links to *Sheshnag* are emphasized when engaging with state institutions or wider religious organizations, while older, localized rituals remain embedded within community-based settings. Here, then, adaptation is neither pure submission nor outright rejection; it is a negotiated process in which survival depends on selective translation and hybridisation.

The unique identity of the valley and the *devta* can also be understood in terms of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect, not only for other local *devi-devtas* but also for other religions. One of the major religious influences in Sangla Valley, apart from Hinduism, is that of Buddhism. Religious practice in Sangla is marked by its long history of interaction with Buddhism. The valley has absorbed Buddhist influences from nearby Kinnaur and Tibet, and there is a widespread acknowledgement of Buddhist sacred spaces and figures. Villagers often describe *Bering Nag* as a deity who not only tolerates but also respects Buddhism, and rituals in the valley frequently make symbolic room for Buddhist presences.

This co-existence extends beyond simple tolerance or acculturation, as it is not merely about one faith absorbing or overpowering the other, but about unaffected hybridization where both traditions merge together to shape sacred landscape. Unlike the tendency of script-oriented mainstream's beliefs toward acculturation, where 'other' traditions are absorbed into its fold and reinterpreted through a fixed lens, the Sangla valley reflects a dialogic coexistence. The acknowledgement of Buddhist sacred spaces, including a temple alongside the temple of *Bering Nag* in Sangla, and the integration of Buddhist rituals into the valley's religious life show that Buddhism is not subordinated but given an autonomous place within the collective sacred imagination. The symbolic gestures, in which the *devta* also often visits the *Bodhmandir*, and people's descriptions of *Bering Nag* as a deity who respects Buddhism point to a syncretic sacrality in which divine figures and traditions maintain their distinctiveness while inhabiting the same ritual and cultural space. This

hybridity thus underscores the Himalayan sacred ethos as one of layering and coexistence rather than strict homogenization.

Altogether, the narrative, ritual and architectural adaptations around *Bering Nag* illustrate how sacred traditions in the Western Himalayas are continually reimagined under broader hegemonic pressures where they bend and mould, but still have succeeded in maintaining their individuality. It is evident that for such little cultures, with adaptation, on one side lies the danger of erasure, as local histories, offerings and ritual secrecy risk being subsumed by standardized practices and scriptural authority, whereas, on the other side, there lies the persistence of agency, expressed in the ways communities reshape adaptation to safeguard traditions, even if these take hybrid or transformed forms.

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