

## **A Narrative on the Deities of the Hills in the Stories of SR Harnot**

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Date of Submission: 01-10-2022

Date of Acceptance: 12-10-2022

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This paper attempts to explore and fathom the concept of faith and devotion toward the deities in the contemporary scenario. The deities are not only worshipped but are the driving force behind any endeavour in the village or the regions where they reside. The deity or the 'Devta' as they are referred to by the people in their native language, influence the lives of the people very strongly, being a part of their everyday lives besides being worshipped on all the festivals and auspicious occasions. Such is the belief system of the natives that the deity is consulted before taking any important decision or finalizing a project or activity. The deity is blended in the environment of the hills and the faith of the people in these gods is as natural as living and breathing. Their lives are blended with the faith in the local gods that are entrenched in their minds since they gain consciousness. As Molu Ram Thakur elaborates in his book *Myths, Rituals, and Beliefs in Himachal Pradesh*, "They dwell in rivers and ravines, in springs and streams, in brooks and lakes, in valleys and dales, in stones and rocks, in trees and plants, in fields and high peaks, over mountains and hills, in woods and forests." (Thakur 51) The deities reside in nature, which is the manifestation of the gods and goddesses. He further talks about the reasons why they are thought to be mingled and merged with nature. "In fact, they live everywhere because there are Gods who are homeless and also wandering deities." (Thakur 51) Such is their aura in these regions and in the daily lives of the people that any occasion is considered to be incomplete without them. "They are so closely connected with the metaphysical and religious life of the hill people that there is hardly any activity which is beyond their sphere of influence...they are numerous and their deitification is highly diversified." (Thakur 58)

Archetypal images are created in the text where the pattern and rituals worshipping the local gods and goddesses are region-specific and are found in the literature of hills. "... the term archetype denotes narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, themes, and images that recur in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even social rituals." (Abrams 18). These denote the specific symbols and motifs in the texts that are repeated while referring to the similar customs that are followed and the rituals that are performed in the specific ceremonies in the hilly regions that are like the "... elemental patterns of myth and ritual that, he (Frazer) claimed, recur in the legends and ceremonials of diverse and far-flung cultures and religions." (Abrams 18)

The idea of a deity is not region-specific to the hills of Himachal alone but is prevalent in every part of the country. The different civilizations of the world have their own set of beliefs and worship the various forms of Gods and Goddesses according to their faiths and conventions that have been formed through the ages. As PCK Prem elaborates "A cursory look at the history of folk literature of different regions and countries, despite variations in lingua franca, traditions, rituals and customs and cultural differences, conveys perennial truths in a spirit of harmony while it beautifies humanity." (Prem 12). All the religions of the world imbibe the principles and doctrines of trust in the symbols of power. God's presence was realised and felt by the people by personifying it. As is clear from these lines, "Epiphany" means "a manifestation," or "showing forth," and by Christian thinkers was used to signify a manifestation of God's presence within the created world." (Abrams 114) Initially, the fables and tales were narrated through the older generation in an oral form that formed an important constituent of the folklore. "Folklore," since the mid-nineteenth century, has been the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by word of mouth and example rather than in written form. Folklore developed, and continues even now, in communities where few if any people can read or write." (Abrams 138) PCK Prem elaborates on folk literature: "Folk literature constitutes psychological, cultural and philosophical areas of growth and development of a country and in the background wholesome ingredients of folklores and folktales stay to reflect on a country's culture, ethos, and heritage." (Prem 8)

The Morality Plays were staged to strengthen the beliefs of the people in their religious ideologies, saints, and God. The folktale, strictly defined, is a short narrative in prose of unknown authorship which has been transmitted orally; many of these tales eventually achieve written form. (Abrams 139) The verses in the plays then took the form of prose gradually transforming them into tales. The representation of the God, deities, and saints became an important part of the prosaic literature as well of that region. “The detailed representation in the prose fiction of the setting, dialect, customs, dress, and ways of thinking and feeling which are distinctive of a particular region.” (Abrams 201). In the stories of SR Harnot, the *devtas* bring about important twists and turns. The stories that would be dealt with the theory of faith in the local deities are “Swarna Devta Dalit Devta”, “The River has Vanished”, “The Saddle” and “Aabhi”. In the stories, the deities are placed in a very privileged and elevated position and connected to them spiritually as well. Besides the regional affinities of the people, the *devtas* and *devis* also influence the ecological dynamics of the places that people believe are dependent on them. The human interactions with the natural environs create problems that are eventually rectified by the deities themselves according to the people’s strong beliefs. “Himachal Pradesh is a treasure trove of rich local heritage, as manifested in its traditions, art and culture. An essential aspect of this heritage is the focus on native gods (*devtas* and *devis*), which was an integral part of the belief systems of the earliest tribal groups who lived in this region” (Sharma et.al). The people of Himachal and their belief system has been encapsulated in the stories of Harnot who has vividly portrayed the customs and rituals associated with the worship of the local deities.

The stories depict an immense amount of faith that people have in the deities of their villages and regions. The stories impact people psychologically who believe that devtas have been hovering around them for ages and are supremely powerful. “The devta or devi plays a central role in the community. The temple complex is the most important building, usually located at the top, or in the centre, of the village. Over time, the community grows either radially with the temple complex as the centre, or extends out below it, depending on the topography of the area.” (Sharma et al) Not a single incident or event takes place in the region without the prior permission of the devta. The deity’s permission is required if something is to be added or changed in the village with regard to construction, land use, services, etc. If he is displeased, his anger is expressed by some inauspicious occurrence that takes place in the region. People then try to please the deity by making offerings or by communicating with the disciples that are called ‘*chelas*’ who are believed to be possessed by the deity when invoked. It is through the ‘*chela*’s body that the deity speaks to the people. People of the regions listen to and narrate the age-old mythical tales that have been passed on for generations about the local deities and their feats that strengthened the faith of the people over them. The concept of the good triumphing over evil has been depicted in these tales that also act as a lesson of morality and inspire the people to follow the virtuous path. The devil is relegated to a position that teaches people to refrain from committing wrong deeds.

The village festivals revolve around the worship of the deity, with the festivities usually consisting of carrying the palanquin of the devta Devi through the village or collaborating with neighbouring villages in holding small fairs that are to be an opportunity for the gods of the respective villages, as well as the village residents, to get together. Local functions and marriages are performed and celebrated only with the permission of or under explicit orders from the isht-*devta* (Main Deity) or kul-*Devi* (Goddess of the Clan). It is not only out of fear but also out of reverence and deep faith that the commands of the deity are followed and adhered to. It is believed that, in exchange, the devta or devi will protect them from harm and misfortune. The *devis* and *devtas* also protect the forests in the region of their dominion and rule. Cutting even a single tree requires their permission. The palanquins of the gods are also made of wood from these forests. In local temples, the idols are made of gold, silver, or electrum which is an alloy of silver, gold and other elements. The deities are placed on wooden palanquins and are dressed in traditional costumes and ornaments—each unique with respect to the others. Local deities are very personal to the communities that worship them. They are present in the daily lives of their devotees, guiding, commanding and counselling people, anticipating problems and helping confront them. People pray to their own deity for good health, good crops, and rain, as it is believed that these things are under the deity’s control. Each devta or devi have their own customs, and they have indicated how they prefer to be worshipped. As a result, local rituals and forms of worship and prayer vary from area to area. Deities decide on the implementation of governmental and non-governmental policies in the area as well—their approval is mandatory. Most of the festivals celebrate the changing seasons and the end of harvest. Deities are asked to bless the people and protect them from misfortune. It is believed that the gods visit Heaven, or Indrapuri, during winter, and that they sleep between July (Shravan) and October (Kartik), so it is during these months that temples and palanquins are repaired and improved, and when non-religious folk festivals are held. The people of Sarain are god-fearing. To expiate guilt, for example, silver ‘hands’ are donated to deities, symbolising the sinner sacrificing the part of themselves that committed the sin.

Nostalgic memories of the village, ancestors surviving in faint reminiscences, history, and ancient times continue haunting a man throughout life. He derives pleasure, shares poignant moments, and keeps empathetic treasure intact. Battles among gods and demons (*suras* and *asuras*), men and gods, gods and goddesses, glimpses of worlds and regions unknown excite

men all over the world irrespective of age, religion or region. Ideas of paradise and hell, men walking on earth with supernatural powers, gods descending on earth in different incarnations and educating men to appear charismatic. Many tales stir feelings of sanctity, faith, fears of suffering and death. Battles and conquests related to men, gods, goddesses and daityas (Monsters) confound minds and here, a few mysteries grow and decline to let slip the origin for the inquisition. (Prem8-9)

The customs and rituals of the regions are followed to honour the deity during special occasions. Sometimes in the hills, a person may invite the deity to his house and the moment is celebrated with a lot of pomp and show. The procession is taken out on the path that the deity travels on to the house of the host. The occasion is marked with a lot of gaiety as most of the time the deity is called when a wish is fulfilled or some auspicious occasion has to be celebrated. "Last evening the devta had come to Leeladas Sharma's home riding on his rath, the tastefully decorated ceremonial palanquin. Two more devtas had also arrived on their raths to his house. Some time ago Leeladas had promised offerings to the devtas in return for the fulfillment of his wish." (Harnot 112) During such occasions, one disciple of the deity is possessed to communicate with the followers and the host who has organized the event in the deity's honour. As Sprya Sharma explains in her article on the devtas: "The religious processions and ceremonies must be performed with the utmost discipline. Every household must personally participate and, if they are not present, they are required to pay a fine as penalty. Festivals start with Vikram Era (Nama Samvat) and each month there are fairs scheduled, including Chatrail, Bishu, Minjar, Fag, Rakshabandhan, Guganaumi, Losar, Sarai, Diwali, Sajo, Dussehra, Faguli, Basant Panchmi, Shivratri, and Holi." (Sharma et, al)

The deity is invoked by this special person who is known as the 'chela'. The deity enters the human body of this person and the presence of the deity in the chela's body is marked by trembling and shivering. A few moments later, the 'chela' starts to talk to the people around them and expresses his displeasure or happiness talking to them. He answers all the questions and guides them in taking important decisions for their bright future. He responds by shaking his head and moving his body which is attributed to the power of the deity whose presence is difficult for the 'chela' and his body to endure both physically and mentally. The whole phenomenon is explained in the following passage from the story by the author very vividly.

When the music reached the highest pitch, the chief goor (Disciple) of the temple on whom the shadow of the deity was supposed to descend would start shaking and shivering until his whole body was in a complete convulsion. He would give a sudden jolt to his head; his cap would tumble down and his long hair would fall on his shoulders. Music would continue at its highest pitch. The gathering would watch the goor spellbound and get convinced that the goor is now in complete possession of the deity. His eyes would become red hot and face black. The other goors would also now feel the deity's shadow descending on them and they would also start shaking and shivering like the chief goor. They held small iron chains in their hands, which they shook and struck their backs thrice or five times. It was a sign that the other deities had now entered and possessed the goors. Thus possessed, the goors would bend to the ground, screaming 'hoouoooo'. Now the chief goor would bang the ground with his hands and shout 'rakkhe' for 'protection. The other goors would repeat the chief goor's words. To control and guide the ceremony five panchs(chiefs) huddled around the goors. This was the beginning of the dharmachar(ritual)which would be followed by the 'petitioners' who would come one by one to reveal their problems and seek the deities' grace. The chief goor would give a patient hearing to each one of them and console them by offering solutions. (Harnot 114)

A procession is carried out when the deity travels in a palanquin which is carried by two men. The followers walk behind the deity honouring his presence and movement. The chariot is decorated beautifully and is adorned and embellished with heavy attires and jewels. The bright and shiny clothes symbolised the aura of the deity and attract the attention of the passersby who bow their heads in supplication and fold their hands to pay obeisance to the devta. They even make offerings in kind or cash which ensures the blessings of the deity on them. The grandeur and the might of the deity can be assessed by the number of people who join in the procession and the house for celebrations. The host and the followers also provide the patronage for the deity so that the traditions are carried out in the society by the future generations as well. The following passage would throw more light on the occasion.

The deities riding the chariots are only symbols of the Divine. The chariot of the chief deity, which I had left behind, was beautifully made. It was built on two long wooden poles covered with silver. The canopy of the chariot is made of gold. Inside the chariot sits the gold mask-like replica of the chief deity. His chariot is surrounded by the chariots of other deities in smaller sizes with replicas made of silver and brass. One female deity is covered with yak-hair about whom it is said that she is a monster deity and, if left uncovered, she will wreak

havoc on people. Wherever her glance falls, things are burnt down. But this is all hearsay and nobody has seen this. Four canopied chariots stand in all four directions, with silver bands on all four sides! Each chariot has a silver plate on which are embossed the names of the priests and the goors as if the deities were their personal property. A huge amount of silver has been used to decorate the chariots. (Harnot 120)

The homecoming of the deity was a grand event that ensured the participation of all the villagers who were involved in one activity or the other to make it successful. The author has used natural imagery to depict how even the natural environs welcomed and paid regard to the deity when he entered the domains of the village. "By far the most important are the village gods and goddesses." (Thakur58) The fields, the sun, the birds, and the winds blowing gently conveyed their reverence for the deity in their ways which have been described by the author in the lines below.

The devatas were about to arrive. The route through which the procession had to pass had been cleaned and cow urine had been sprinkled on it to purify it so that the devatas would not be polluted. People were waiting for the devatas. Birds... had ensconced themselves on the trees around... they sang the welcome songs as the old women sang on auspicious moments... It seemed as though the sun was standing on the last step of the ladder in order to have a glimpse of the devatas and watch them greet each other. He seemed to be sending his golden rays to convey his regards to them. The golden colour of the ripe wheat crop in the fields added a new glow to the air. A gentle breeze was blowing and the waving wheat stalks seemed to be nodding their participation in the ceremony. (Harnot 60)

The musical notes that are played for reception by the traditional pipe players also play an important role in greeting the deity. "When a devta or devi travels, a whole caravan travels along with them, including the chharidhar, the *bhandari* (storekeeper), the *pujari* (priest), *bajantris* (musicians), and others who are assigned specific duties." (Sharma et, al) The traditional musical instrument known as the 'narsinga'(musical instrument) emits a peculiar sound that purifies the environment, infusing celestial feelings among the people who have been waiting for the deity. "Devotion to devtas and devis is a way of life for villagers...Folk dances are a spontaneous expression of the joy of life and, together with folklore and devotional music..." (Sharma et, al) The different deities connote different myths related to them which are elaborated by the author in the stories.

The devatas' raths began to arrive. The melody of their instruments wafted in the air. The whole village came out in their welcome. The members of the committee were standing at the gate of the jatara ground. For each devata, there was a separate plate with thick sweetened rotis(bread) as prasad, incense, and garlands. The deep sound of the narsinga (musical instrument) filled the air with thrill and excitement. (Harnot 161)

Some devtas are so aggressive and powerful that holding and controlling them becomes a very hard task for the bearers. The weight of the chariot increases manifolds, restricting its movement and making it difficult to move forward. "They are numerous and their deitification highly diversified. There are Jamlus, Shirguls, Pals, Gahris, Nags, Dums, Thans, Sippis, Banshiras and many others" (Thakur 58) Some devtas are considered to be more powerful and are not local but are deities who have connections with the Indian epics like Mahabharata, an example of which is given by the author in the story. "Some village gods claiming greatness among the smaller deities of the area as 'great deities' i.e., Mahadeos.... Some village gods claimed their predominance by declaring themselves or by declaring by their worshippers as 'bara deo', 'mahadeo', 'Mahasu' or even 'bara mahadeo'."(Thakur 52) Mahunag is the devta who is believed to be an incarnation of Karna. To pacify this fiery deity him, special offerings are made. A special musical note is played in his honour to please him. The author mentions his chariot and the struggle that the disciples who carry him have to go through in maneuvering him.

Just then, the eleventh devata was seen arriving. ..He is known as Mahunag, an incarnation of the Mahabharat warrior, Karna. As soon as he reached the festival ground, he grew furious and his fury was unleashed on the bearers of the rath(chariot). The rath became very heavy. The bearers began to sweat profusely. The devata made the rath carriers run around the ground. The rath moved forward and backward. It tilted down and righted itself. The carriers found it immensely difficult to keep their hold on the rath amidst the frenzied sounds of the folk instruments. The accompanying pujari tried to pacify the devata and sought his forgiveness. (Harnot 162)

In the story "Aabhi", the goddess Budhi Nagin Ma has been depicted in hibernation form during the winters. The importance of the goddess is also very relevant in the hills and they are considered to be the manifestation of power, strength, and endurance. "The cult of Devi is, also, very prominent. She is venerated

under various names” (Thakur 55) It seems that the snow around the lake has forced the goddess to remain in deep slumber. It is another way of providing a hiatus from normal natural activities. The bird aabhi too is free from her work of cleaning the lake which is now frozen. This has been mentioned in the story by the author when he writes: “Aabhi again goes to Budhi Nagin Ma’s doors to make her plaint but no one hears her pleas—not even Budhi Nagin Ma; it seems she too is hiding from the cold wave, deep in the inner sanctum of the temple.” (176). These lines depict the manner in which the deities in the hills are closely connected to nature and the seasons. The following lines from an article in Sahapedia elaborately describe how the temples and the devtas have been held in high esteem in the villages of Himachal Pradesh would enable us to understand how the author has been influenced by these rituals and has been able to blend these images in his stories to construct plots that are so closely associated with the devta and the belief system that exists there. It is natural for the people to be influenced by the devta and also to imbibe and embrace them in all walks of their social and religious lives.

The people of Himachal have a unique way of celebrating fairs and performing traditional rituals to mark births, deaths, harvests, or good rainfall. Dev temples, or *kothis* are the focal point of religion and faith for the villagers. In many places, the *kothis* of landlords (*thakurs*) have been converted into temples. Ancient folklore often deals with stories of gods or chivalrous heroes or chieftains. The people of Himachal love festivals and participate enthusiastically in local festivals and fairs. No religious function is considered complete without the presence of the devta. During religious occasions, people bring out the *chhari* (the stick belonging to the devta, and symbolic of his power) and it is carried by the *chharidhar*. When the devta is taken on *jagran*, or procession, or to some other religious function, the golden *chhari* is always carried along. When collecting money, the silver *chhari* is carried by the *chharidhar*. (Sharma et.al)

In modern times, with the advent of technology and high-speed mediums of transport, the relevance of the belief in Devta is rendered archaic and questionable. The new generation that has grown up using electronic gadgets and surfing the internet, finds this belief system difficult to follow. The advancement in science and the developmental changes brought about by the government and the administration have relegated the position of the deity whose consent is not taken for the planning and commencement of any activity that takes place in the region. This chapter explores the balance that humans have tried to maintain between developmental projects and the belief in a deity that persists in the people who reside in remote villages. The decisions of the government have often led to the depletion of natural sources and environmental degradation. The ecological balance has been disturbed by the construction of dams that have brought about irreparable damage to the region. The people have immense faith in the gods and goddesses which is sometimes shaken by their inability in dealing with the same.

As PCK Prem has pointed out in the lines below:

Myths and legends, many a time, refuse clear rationalization, and yet man begins to relate lives to the ancient tales, and conceives fresh little tales with gods, men supermen and ghosts, and animals and birds playing prominent roles in reading life. With the passage of time, folk literature became a part of life. The little tales speak not only of the predicament of earthly life but also hint at a contented and glorious celestial future. (Prem 1)

This shows that logical reasoning is often ignored by the people when it comes to worshipping their deities, the fanfare and the expensive celebrations in the processions and the feast are a kind of patronage that is provided to the deities by the rich, influential, and powerful people of the village and region. The celebrations cannot be afforded by the poor people though they revere the deities as much. This is another aspect that the author has elaborated upon. There is a streak of sarcasm in the lines which hints at the disparity between the classes and how this becomes evident on occasions like these ‘*jataras*’ (religious ceremony) which refers to the travel, procession, and reception of the deity by the villagers. This ceremony has been written about descriptively by the author and quoted below to emphasize the importance of the Deity in the lives of the people.

No doubt *jataras* were held almost every year but only after somebody’s wish had been fulfilled. There was always a selfish reason behind these *jataras*: either someone had been blessed with a child or somebody was cured of a disease. *Jataras* were held when somebody’s business had prospered or somebody’s family had come out of some difficult situation. But *jatara* for the construction of a road or the opening of a primary school or the election victory of a candidate or party was unheard of. Moreover, organizing a *jatara* is not everybody’s cup of tea. Apart from other things, you have to make arrangements for goats for sacrifice which is an extremely costly affair; and this done, you have to invite people from your and neighbouring villages. Every rath is accompanied by thirty or forty persons who

need to be looked after with special care in matters of food and clothes. And then there was the expenditure on a number of workers who were temporarily employed during the ceremony, apart from the routine pujaris and temple employees. Each village had its own temple committee and the members of these committees had to be approached for participating in the ceremony along with the rath procession of their village devata. It was really a very complex and expensive affair. (Harnot 158)

The author has also elaborated upon the existence of the deity which people believed was in the form of an important character, Som in the story "The River has Vanished". It was this character that the people regarded as an incarnation of the devta itself considering the task that he had accomplished which the villagers could have never imagined. Their village would now be on the road map of the state as the government had agreed to connect it via the road. This was an achievement for the villagers who gave the credit of convincing the government to do it to Som. The deity had probably chosen Som as a medium for this feat or was it Som who was now the devta for the.

The crowd was so overwhelmed by these announcements that for a few moments it was dumbfounded. The people simply couldn't believe their ears that they had got such a huge bounty without even asking for it. At that moment a question lit up in their minds about who was the real devata ...? (Harnot 165)

The Deity, on invocation, expressed his anger and summoned the local MLA and Chief Minister but the request was politely turned down citing administrative reasons and attributing the decision to the larger issue of the development of that area. The deity's interference in such matters was also perceived and depicted as a political conspiracy to prevent the present government from taking the credit for carrying out this developmental activity. The government plays safe by citing administrative reasons and preventing any kind of dishonoring of the deity. Taking such decisions without the consent and will of the deity is an aspect that has been depicted in the story in the following lines:

When a group of holy men invoked the deity, he was angry. The pradhan, legislator, and the chief minister bore the brunt of his anger. Talk of total destruction was in the air. It was decided that the legislator be called before the deity. An order on behalf of the deity was issued but the legislator did not appear before him. Then an order was sent to the chief minister. In a very balanced tone, the chief minister replied that he had great respect for the deity but to bring the deity in matters of development was some kind of opposition politics. People lost hope. (Harnot 172)

The deity had now adorned another role, from being the worshipped one to that of a protestor. It had assumed the role of a leader of the protesting villagers who were struggling for their existence. This deity was symbolic of the religious ethnicity of the people. People considered the deity to be supremely powerful and mighty and hoped that its presence would play a vital role in forcing the government to revoke its decision of the construction of the dam. People had not lost faith in the devta and were still very optimistic that the devta accompanying them would make a huge difference in the attitude of the government.

By noon, the deity reached the place of protest. Accompanying the deity were innumerable people. More than a hundred were already there obstructing the work of the company. The deity and the government's police force reached the spot almost at the same time. People had the belief that now no powers that be could crush their protest. They had the deity with them and they had the deity's might with them. (Harnot 172)

The incident of the caning and shooting by the police on the protestors in the presence of the devta was undoubtedly a very disturbing incident that had shaken the faith of the people. The audacity of the policemen, who had followed the orders from their higher authorities of disengaging the protestors and preventing them from disrupting the construction work, came as a bolt from the blue for the villagers. They were shocked psychologically and wounded physically. The silence of the deity was as mysterious as it was questionable too. "The deity watched all that silently. His power was not revealed. The oracle did not speak. The assistant oracles too were silent." (Sharma173) The delusion and shock of the people on seeing their deity helpless have been elaborated upon by the author very descriptively and vividly in the following lines from the story:

Somehow the people were pacified and then the deity was locked up in the temple. That was the limit of their faithlessness. That day several illusions had come to an end. Several beliefs had died. The deity was lying silent in the temple. He had lost all his power. Where had all his power gone? Why did he not help the people? Why had no miracle taken place? Why did the deity not show his gigantic form? Then why had the people of the village and the entire area carried his burden? ... Such questions confronted the people again and again." (Harnot 74)

The author has not ended the story here but has kept the conclusion a little ambiguous by narrating the events that happened the next day. The news of the next day is a confusing statement that doesn't specify why

and how the events that took place. The policemen who had beaten up the protestors were attacked by a mob of people. This has been described as the fury of the deity who showed his power through the villagers themselves by taking multiple human forms. The villagers had become a representative of the deity's anger and had taken revenge by attacking the policemen who were making merry by consuming alcohol and non-vegetarian food. The celebration of the policemen had turned into a nightmare for them. The faith of the devta was restored in the people and more importantly for a very genuine reason. The construction of the dam was not acceptable to the devta as it would have ruined the region's ecology and the environment. In today's world, the devta's role had become one of the religious preachers, who would consider all the modern aspects and help in the progressive works that would do good to humanity. Any activity that is undertaken in the name of development but that would have a long-lasting negative impact on the people and the environment would be opposed by the devta. His might was shown at the time when the faith of the people was on the brink of being devastated timely reaction of the deity has reinstated its position in the village. The whole incident has been described in the following lines of the story by the author:

But the next day the newspaper headlines broke the news that people who had been the victims of oppression that day had attacked intoxicated policemen and company people who were celebrating their success with meat and drink, and also that in the morning, there was no trace of them left behind. At the scene, lay only some guns, a few lathis, dozens of broken liquor bottles, goats' heads and skin, and some torn pieces of khaki uniforms. Perhaps the deity, whom the oppression of the police had turned into a deserter, appeared collectively in the villagers and the anger of the people destroyed the oppressive arm of the government. (Harnot 175)

The next story "Aabhi" depicts the faith of the bird in the goddess that is believed to be residing near the lake. The temple near the lake has been dedicated to the goddess named Budhi Nagin Mata and who is considered to be in the form of a snake. During winters, it is believed that the snake goddess goes into hibernation. It is another way of allowing the birds to take a rest as well. The rest of the year, the lake is in liquid form and is visited by many pilgrims. The twigs and leaves of the trees are picked up by the birds. However, the litter that is thrown by the visitors is something that the bird finds difficult to clean. The winter months are like a boon for the lake and its environs as no pilgrims visit and cause any kind of pollution. The goddess is believed to cover the area with snow all the winter months to conserve the forests and keep them free from pollutants.

Aabhi feels that Budhi Nagin Ma weaves this entire weft and warp of winter for the sole purpose of giving Aabhi rest from her labours. It is she who brings the snow. She freezes the lake and makes it like an ice rink so that for six months not even a whit of straw or twig falls into the lake. No one comes to throw litter into it. (Harnot 178)

The forest fires caused by the men who smoke in the forests have been written about in the story. An important turn takes place when the man who negligently throws the cigarette into the forest is engulfed in himself. This is considered to be done by the goddess Budhi Nagin Ma who doesn't tolerate any kind of harm done to the forest. "Budhi Nagin Ma has awakened from her slumber and watches the man bobbing in the water from behind her doors." (183) The narrative ends here amplifying the impact of the Goddess's fury caused by the negligence of the humans that causes a large environmental damage. It is only the Goddess that can rectify the misdoings of the people by the supernatural powers that the natives believe them to possess. This would not only reinstate the faith of people in the deities but also warn about the effect of dereliction their duty and responsibility towards nature that is considered to be mother and nurturer as well.

## **Conclusion**

Hence we can conclude that in the stories have tried to narrate incidences where the faith and belief in the devta are depicted vividly. The customs and the traditional practices of worshiping the deity have been described descriptively by the author. With the advent of technology and advancement in science, developmental activities are being carried out for the overall development of the region and the state. The analysis has depicted the challenges, that the faith and belief system of the villagers face at the hands of the government. The deity is not acknowledged officially by the administration but the people's sentiments are attached to it. The instances in the chapter where the deity's faith has been questioned have been quoted adequately. There are a few instances where the violators of the natural ecology have been punished appropriately in mysterious circumstances. Though the situation is ambiguous yet the people believe that these incidents took place at the behest of the gods and the goddesses. This incident reinstates the faith of the deities and also ensures the conservation of the environment at the backdrop of developmental activities. Thus, balance is struck at a very delicate point where the individual mind stops analysing the situation logically when overtaken by the euphoria and revelry surrounding the celebration of the faith in the devta. The rational evaluation is influenced by the emotional and passionate persuasion of the traditional beliefs and customary rituals that the people follow in the hills.

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