The trail of an eastern deity in the western Himalaya: a study of Lord Jagannath’s temple in the Sirmaur region of Himachal Pradesh

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Introduction

1 The interplay of religion and politics is a central theme in South Asian history. Dealt with by historians and anthropologists alike, the nexus of religious cults and state apparatuses has generated numerous studies that clarify complex historical processes related to state-building across the Indian subcontinent. The extensive study of the cult of Jagannath in Puri by Hermann Kulke (1974) exemplifies this line of enquiry. By employing textual sources in conjunction with ethnographic data, Kulke delineated the cult’s emergence from a small establishment at the fringes of Orissa into a state cult with a pan-Indian following. In patronising the regionally popular cult, Khurda rulers of Orissa earned a robust standing in North Indian politics that manifested itself in the adoption of the rituals and objects of worship associated with the cult by aspiring rulers across South Asia (Kulke 1974: 60–77). The role of ascetic movements in facilitating these processes has been conclusively attested to by William Pinch (2006), who demonstrated the centrality of these ‘political sadhus’ in the rise of states and polities well into the British period through a combination of political machinations and expert military capacities (Pinch 2006: 8–9).

2 These pan-Indian phenomena also occur in Himalayan states. In their study of centre-periphery dynamics in Nepal, Richard Burghart and Gaenszle (2016) and Véronique Bouillier (1997) highlight the centrality of ascetics of the Ramanandi sampraday and Nath Yogis in the expansion of Kathmandu’s authority in the eastern and western hills, respectively. Closer to the political centre, Christoph Zotter (2018) underlines the
contribution of ascetics to the workings of the state, through the analysis of historical documents. In the western Indian Himalaya, Mahesh Sharma (1995: 105) considers the supralocal and pan-Indian connections of sadhu-controlled pilgrimage sites in the Kangra region of Himachal Pradesh, while Arik Moran (2013) traces the spread of devotional Vaishnavism into the Kullu region to the services of Ramanandi ascetics with connections to both Rajasthan and Ayodhya.

This paper furthers these enquiries by tracing the spread of devotional Vaishnavism from the east Indian cult of Jagannath in Orissa to the western Himalayan kingdom of Sirmaur. It argues that the extension of patronage to the cult, in conjunction with the establishment of a new capital, contributed to Sirmauri rulers’ rise in western Himalayan politics and served to increase their respectability in the North Indian political arena at large. The facilitation of these processes by bairagi ascetics from Rajasthan, who became leaders (mahants) of various state temples in Sirmaur, is examined in detail and their integration into the kingdom is explained. By the 18th century, migrant bairagis had become sufficiently entrenched in local society to popularise the worship of Krishna and Jagannath through the building of various thakurdwaras in what seems to have been a final stage of integration of the devotional creed into the Cis area of Sirmaur and the surrounding princely hill states. To make sense of these processes, it is first of all necessary to account both for the declaration made by the Khurda kings that Lord Jagannath is a state-deity and for the political implications of this ostensibly religious act.

Establishment of Jagannath as a signifier of political prestige

The story of how Jagannath, a decidedly local deity, became a state deity (rashtra-devta) under the Ganga (1112–1435 CE) and Suryavamsa dynasties (1435–1540 CE) of Orissa is recounted in several histories. According to Anncharlott Eschmann (Eschmann et al 1986: 148), the Ganga dynasty gained control over the fertile Mahanadi delta in the 11th–12th centuries CE through a series of struggles with the Colas and Kalacuris. The successful outcome of these struggles was attributed to local deities who were granted superior status in the state, most notably Jagannath, who became the presiding deity in 1230 CE (Eschmann 1986: 151–2). In adopting Jagannath as a state deity, Ganga rulers seem to have followed a general shift in South Asian political culture that recasts the hitherto politically and religiously supreme sovereign as a servant of powerful state deities (eg Veluthat 1978: 45).

While Ganga kings were considered the sole legitimate ‘Gajapati’ rulers of Orissa (Kulke 1974: 62), there soon began a trend in neighbouring states of ceding political power to the cult. This process of cultic expansion was cut short by the Afghan army attack of 1568 CE, which saw the destruction of the wooden sculptures of Jagannath by the Afghan general Kalapahar (Rahim 1961: 177). Nevertheless, declaring kings as rulers on behalf of state deities was quickly resumed. In 1572 CE, King Ramacandra Deva from south Orissa established a small kingdom in Ganjam and over a small part of Puri, with Khurda as its capital; three years later, the raja installed new wooden images of the Jagannath trinity in the Puri temple (Singer 1958:3).
According to the Madala Panji chronicle of Orissa (circa 1575 CE), the reinstallation of the new idols took place in the presence of all the sanyasins, Brahamcarins and Brahmins who gave ‘maharaja Ramacandra’ the title of ‘second Indradyumna’ along with a turban that symbolised his status as Jagannath’s official representative. The chronicle clearly describes the event as a great success, since ‘the first Indradyumna’ was none other than the legendary founder of the Jagannatha temple who plays the role of personified god-king in many legends and Puranas of Orissa (Kulke 1974: 63–4). The installation ceremony was followed by a systematic reorganisation of the cult’s administration, including the establishment of new shasana (Brahmin) villages around Puri that cemented the raja’s power.²

The success of the Khurda raja in establishing an exclusive relationship with Jagannath was curtailed by the clash between Afghan and Mughal forces on the Bengal frontier, the effects of which were also felt in Orissa.

By 1591, the Rajput ruler Man Singh Kachawaha entered Orissa to wage a decisive battle on behalf of Mughals. Having crushed the Afghan armies in 1591–92 CE, Man Singh sought to curb the power of Ramacandra of Khurda, who was charged with providing shelter to Afghan nobles (Singer 1958: 6). However, according to the Akbarnama, the Mughal emperor preferred to secure the cooperation of the Hindus of Orissa by extending a generous hand to Ramacandra Deva, given the latter’s reputation as the renewer of Jagannath worship in the region (Beveridge 1907: 880). Man Singh was thus forced to re-instate the Khurda king, resulting in a second wave of religious support in the latter’s favour.¹ The traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier thus observed that ‘[t]he Jagannath temple became the most famous Hindu temple in the Mughal empire. All the idolaters in the domain of the great Mughals and other princes, at least once in their life go on pilgrimage most generally to Jagannath, for being the first and most considerable of the Pagodas’ (cited in Ball 1925: 432).

If the appointment of Ramacandra of Khurda as superintendent of the Jagannath temple was in keeping with Akbar’s imperial orders, it did little to abate the grudging competition from his subordinate Hindu commander Man Singh Kachawaha (Sahu 1956: 391). As North Indian royals under Mughal protection, Man Singh Kachawaha and Ramcandra of Khurda competed for status and prestige in the imperial court. This competition played out in religious policies, with the popularity of Jagannath posing a significant challenge to Man Singh Kachawaha’s reputation as founder of large-scale temples in and beyond Rajasthan (Asher 2020: 4–27). In reaction to these developments, Hindu rulers from across the subcontinent began flocking to the Jagannath temple in Puri, which became a strong symbol of religious power (Singer 1958: 9).

After Akbar’s death, the policy implemented by the Mughal subahdars of Cuttack towards the Khurda dynasty and the Jagannath temple changed rapidly, with frequent attacks by Mughal armies recorded over the following two centuries (Kulke 1974: 65). Responding to this desperate situation, Khurda kings used their position as official caretakers of the cult of Jagannath to gain allies by offering to share their position with feudatory kings (samanta raja) (Kulke 1974: 65). The liberalisation of privileged access to Jagannath quickly breached the circle of feudatory kings to include numerous rulers from across the subcontinent.

According to the Śrījagannāthsthalamārvttāntam (hereafter JSV), a historical/devotional text that was composed in Telugu in 1971 and translated into English in 2005, the Puri
establishment received a growing number of visits from rulers from Orissa, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Gujarat, Assam, Manipur, Tripura and various other parts of the subcontinent from the 17th century onwards (Satyanaran 2005: 50–9; Tripathi and Singh 2012: 24–7). Royal visitors would visit the inner sanctum, perform puja, partake in rituals, and would then repay these honours with huge donations. These visits would usually conclude with the royal pilgrim obtaining a replica of the Jagannath idols (murtis), which would then be brought back and set up in their home states. The kingdom of Sirmaur is a case in point.

The establishment of Jagannath in Sirmaur

The kingdom of Sirmaur, which largely occupied the area of the district of the same name in Himachal Pradesh (India), made up part of the western Himalayan Rajput states. While its early origins are shrouded in myth, the Tarikh-i-Riyasat Sirmaur (Singh 2007) or ‘History of Sirmaur State’, which is largely based on the chronicle (vamshavali) of the ruling dynasty, traces the establishment of the Rajput line to the migration of a Bhatti Rajput prince from Jaisalmer to the hills during the first centuries of the second millennium CE. The prince would have encountered a cultural landscape far different to the one from which he came, as may be deduced from the resilience of the cults of territorial gods in most parts of the kingdom. In this respect, Rajput rulers seem to have been only partly integrated into their environment during the first centuries of their rule.

By the early modern era, Sirmaur had come under the protection of the Mughal Empire. As official partakers in the imperial project, the elite came into contact with new political and religious currents from this multi-ethnic empire. As in other parts of the hills, these processes came to play a central part in the remodelling of Rajput kingship and politics along pan-North Indian lines that crystallised into the adoption of deities from prestigious centres in the plains. In Sirmaur, this occasioned the introduction of Jagannath of Puri into the kingdom through the mediation of bairagi ascetics from the ruling line’s home turf of Rajasthan.

The earliest reference to Jagannath in the royal chronicle (Singh 2007: 204–5) is closely connected with the founding of a new capital for the kingdom on a hilltop overlooking the plain by raja Karam Parkash I (r circa 1616–1630) in 1621 CE. The raja was directed to choose the site (modern-day Nahan) by Baba Banwari Das, a sadhu from Jaipur (Rajasthan), who was then living in the wilderness at the place where the temple of Jagannath now stands (Kapur 1934: 13). According to the current pujari of the Jagannath temple, Baba Banwari Das asked the raja to first build the temple and only afterwards found the city (Surender Sharma, personal communication, October 2019). The raja then went to Puri, took the wooden idols and installed them in a small temple in the ancient capital of Sirmauri Tal (alias Rajban), from which they were ultimately transported to the current temple of Jagannath in Nahan.

That this is historically implausible is clear since the Khurda raja had rebuilt the images circa 1575 CE (see above), which would suggest that the images that raja Karm Prakash I installed in Sirmaur (circa 1621) were wooden replicas of the originals that had been destroyed by the Afghan commander in 1568 CE. Both, Shri Ajay Bahadur Singh who is the current head of the House of Sirmaur, and the current mahant of the Jagannath temple at Nahan opine that it is quite likely that raja Karam Parkash had visited Puri.
and brought back images of the latter to his mountain kingdom. In this respect, the raja of Sirmaur would have followed the path of his peers in the North Indian elite, whose pilgrimage to Puri would conclude with the instalment of replicas of the divine trinity in their respective domains. The Sirmauri ruler would thus signal his participation in the broad circle of North Indian rulers who patronised Jagannath, while remaining firmly rooted within the framework of the Mughal Empire.

Fig 1 Outside view of Jagannath Temple, Nahan (Sirmaur), Himachal Pradesh, India.

Photographed by author Neelam with permission from temple authorities on 4 November 2020.
Historical veracity aside, the ‘salvage mission’ story reveals something about its authors’ priorities insofar as it quite clearly aims at bolstering the royal line’s credentials as devout followers of Jagannath and Rajasthani mahants. More importantly, granting that the personages and entities featuring in the story are not entirely fictive, this historical episode also reveals (1) that bairagi ascetics were already present in Sirmaur before the new capital was established in Nahan; (2) that the ascetics wielded sufficient authority to influence the Bhatti Rajput royals; and (3) that the bairagis played a key part in introducing Vaishnavism into Sirmaur. These findings are consistent with the introduction of a politically potent form of devotional Vaishnavism into neighbouring Himalayan kingdoms, such as Kullu, where bairagis of the Ramanandi community (sampradaya) whose historical base was in Rajasthan played a key part in introducing their deities as the presiding state deity (Moran 2013).

It is worth noting that the congruence in origins between rulers, ascetics and deities that is displayed in Kullu’s early modern transition to Vaishnavism is absent in the case of Sirmaur. For, though the Sirmauri king and his guru have common Rajasthani origins, the deity they introduced into the kingdom originates from the eastern state of Orissa, nearly two thousand kilometres from the mountain state. For lack of further written evidence, the political motivations for the seemingly unlikely adoption of the deity remain unclear. These could have stemmed, for example, from the Sirmauri Rajputs’ opposition to the Kachawaha lineage of Jaipur that would have been historically opposed to Jagannath, from the Bhatti rulers’ need to dissociate themselves from the parent branch in Jaisalmer, where Shaiva Nathas wielded considerable political

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clout, or from a merely personal inclination on the part of the rulers. To grasp a better understanding of the shift in orientation, it is necessary to take a closer look at the ritual practices and beliefs associated with the Jagannath temple in Nahan and its caretakers.

Fig 3 The ancient wooden images of the Jagannath Trinity.

These idols are kept in the temple storeroom, Nahan (Sirmaur), Himachal Pradesh, India. Photographed by author Neelam with permission from temple authorities on 4 November 2020.

Towards an Identification of Sirmaur's Vaishnava ascetics

18 The temple of Jagannath in Nahan was built by raja Mahi Parkash, alias Budh Parkash (r 1659–78). There are certain ambiguities regarding the time span of this raja's reign, the arrival of Banwari Das from Rajasthan and the official dating of the temple to 1681 CE.11 For one, the royal chronicle attributes the introduction of Jagannath into the kingdom to a predecessor of Mahi Prakash, raja Karam Prakash I (r 1616–30), who followed the orders of the Vaishnava ascetic Banwari Das and brought the images from Puri. Banwari Das, however, worshipped Narsingh (the lion-headed god, the fourth incarnation of Vishnu) before the arrival of Jagannath in Sirmaur as in the manner of Ramanandis in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, who largely tended to follow Govind Dev or Krishna. This suggests that Banwari Das had either visited Puri himself or that he was in touch with wandering ascetics of Orissa who promoted their cause (eg Singer 1958: 19–20 and 30 fn ii; Satyanarayan 2005: 48–61).

19 A useful tool for ascertaining the nature of the links between the two sites is to compare their ritual protocols. The JSV provides a detailed list of the rituals that used
to be performed in Puri, which included daily oblations, seven rounds of food offerings (rajbhog), two cycles of prayers (mangala arti in the morning and sandhya puja in the evening) and special ceremonies on days of sankranti (fortnight of month) and during grahans (eclipses), as well as daily prayers (seva-puja) that were performed during festive seasons. While these are largely in keeping with the rituals followed in Nahan, the current priest’s claim that Banwari Das established these traditions is difficult to corroborate. In fact, the list of awardees of privileges by the Khurda kings, the official caretakers of Jagannath in Orissa, makes absolutely no mention of Sirmaur (JSV 2005:53), suggesting that its rulers – had they ever actually visited Puri – were among the numerous unnamed royal pilgrims who flocked to the site in the early modern era.

The links between Sirmaur and Puri can nonetheless be more closely defined by scrutinising the possible meanings behind Banwari Das’s Rajasthani origins. Firstly, the baba’s migration from ‘Jaipur’ may well indicate a link with the Ramanandi institution at Galta outside the Kachawaha capital. As a centre of bairagi activity, Galta spawned numerous religious institutions across the subcontinent, through which its ascetics exercised power. The adoption of Raghunath as state deity in Kullu, for example, can be traced back to Ramanandi bairagis who promoted worship of the deity in Galta, from which they expanded to Pindori as they established additional seats (gaddis) in Ayodhya (Moran 2013: 9). Unfortunately, no such evidence exists in the case of Jagannath in Sirmaur. In fact, the only evidence of the cult’s existence in Rajasthan is a land deed granted by the Mewar rulers in circa 15th–16th centuries (Tod, Vol 1 1873: 238). The later history of the Jagannath temple in Nahan may, however, provide additional clues to Oriyan-Himalaya ties when additional Jagannath temples were established along with worship rituals in these temples. As explained later in this article, rituals performed in Jagannath temple in Sirmaur were small-scale replica of performances carried out in Jagannath temple in Puri.

Banwari Das served as chief representative of Jagannath in Sirmaur for 61 years until his death in 1676 CE. He was succeeded by his disciple, Sanghi Rikhi Das, who became the first mahant of the Jagannath temple after its founding in 1681 CE. Eight mahants followed in succession. In 1900 CE, Parasram Das became the ninth mahant of this temple (Singh 2007: 190). After that, the government took possession of the temple and appointed a priest instead of the sectarian nomination of mahants, apparently due to power and money struggles within the establishment (personal communication, Surender Sharma, November 2020). It is worth noting that rules governing succession in the Jagannath temple of Nahan seem to have conformed with the ‘perpetual succession’ model found in Puri and eastern Rajasthan, which grants custodians of the temple the right to select successors, with this selection subsequently being approved by the king (Horstmann 1999). This sanction by the Royal House reflects the cult’s political clout in the state, which was evinced in the mandatory taking of an oath before Jagannath in courts of law (Singh 2007: 248) and in asking for his permission and blessing before committing sati (Singh 2007:251—2). This authority extended to the financial realm because the mahant assumed the capacity of tax collector in at least one revenue-related legal case (Kapur 1934: 42).

The clout of the Vaishnava establishment in Sirmaur was substantial, but not exclusive. Nath yogis of Kalisthan temple emerge as a powerful counterweight, who enjoyed similar liberties in choosing their mahants (Krishannath: 10–11) and whose representatives served as priests (raj-purohit) to the monarch. The seeming balance...
between Vaishnava (Jagannath) and Shaiva (Kalistan) religious creeds was actively maintained by the Bhatti Rajputs till well into the 19th century, with temples and endowments being given to both creeds throughout history. The temple of Chaubis Bhuja Devi (‘goddess with 24 arms’) adjacent to the Shaiva establishment of Kalistan, for example, was built by raja Fateh Parkash (r 1815–50) and maintained by knaferra jogi Bhring Nath, the mahant of Kalistan temple. While an extensive review of Shaiva involvement in Sirmaur is beyond the purview of this paper, it is clear that Nath ascetics were still relevant to the kingdom’s political and religious life after the establishment of the Vaishnavas under Rajput auspices.

Today, the Jagannath temple holds a relatively new set of three large wooden images of the Jagannath trinity (Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra) with a gallery of deities in marble and black stone below, alongside a row of Shaligrams (shiny black stones emblematic of Vishnu). Most of these are sheltered by a canopy made up of the many heads of Sheshnag, Vishnu’s divine serpent-couch (Mitra 2007: 63). Though the priest of the temple claims that the idols are changed every twelve years, we found only two sets of idols in the storeroom in addition to the third set on display in the temple sanctum. It is likely that the old wooden idols have been kept in the temple for many years and are probably only replaced when the old ones perish (not every twelve years as per the replacement ‘rule’).

Fig 4 Last wooden idols to be renewed and kept in the storeroom of Lord Jagannath's temple in Nahan (Sirmaur) Himachal Pradesh, India.
From Jagannath to Krishna: The establishment of thakurdwaras in Sirmaur

The decline of Mughal authority in the 18th century and the increased autonomy of the hill states heralded a new phase in the integration of Vaishnavism in Sirmaur. The most prominent evidence of this change is the establishment of new Vaishnava temples or thakurdwaras in the hills (including in the higher reaches near Jubbal, cf Moran 2019b: 17). Note that the main images worshipped at these sites were of Krishna and Govinda, not of Jagannath.

For narrative’s sake, the beginnings of these transitions that took place in Sirmaur may be dated to the founding of a second temple to Jagannath in Narayangarh by raja Kirat Prakash (r 1757–73) in the year he came to power. The temple received tax-free land as a gift (jagir), a village named after the ruler (Kiratpur) and, later on, additional land from the tract (mouja) of Surajpur near Ramgarh in the inner hills near present-day Chandigarh (Singh 2013: 191, 302; Singh 2007: 217). Ten years later in 1767, the raja’s wife founded a thakurdwara in Ramkundi, which housed for a short period the remains of the mahant of the Jagannath temple of Nahan (Singh 2007: 191). While it is unclear whether the mahant of the Jagannath temple was privy to these divisions, oral traditions clearly indicate that the mahants of the institution played a key role in sustaining the rituals and traditions of Puri in their immediate domains. While this would indicate that the influence of the Jagannath cult grew among state leaders, the
establishment of various thakurdwaras in Sirmaur with markedly different objects of devotion paints a more complex picture.

Among the numerous spiritual lineages of devotional religion that flourished in early modern North India, the Krishnaite movement holds a unique place of prominence. While the transmission of teachings and practices may have differed between followers of Vallabha, Caitanya, etc, the overarching focus of these creeds of Krishna engendered the continual expansion of its worship in various forms and guises. The fusion of regional cults with Krishna worship also manifested itself in Puri where the celebrated rath yatra came to be equated with the travels of Krishna (Horstmann 1999; Mukherjee 1940). The emmehment of religious narratives and ritual practices resulted in a large-scale amalgamation of Vaishnavism with the specificities of Krishnaitite devotion. In Sirmaur, these processes manifested themselves in the founding of various thakurdwaras that would gradually come under the influence of the Jagannath institution in Nahan.

A prominent indication of Krishnaitite religion in Nahan is evinced by the commissioning of a new thakurdwara in Noni (Nahan) by the Kumaoni wife of raja Bijay Parkash of Sirmaur (r 1713–49), on her return from a pilgrimage to holy places (mainly Mathura and Vrindavan) associated with Krishna. In a similar way, the illustrious raja Fateh Parkash (r 1815–50) visited Gaya and Mathura with his family members towards the end of his life (Singh 2007: 256–7), while his sisters professed an ardent desire to retire ‘to Brindaban and other holy places’ upon the death of their husbands (Moran 2019a: 194). Devotionalism among the Sirmauri elite persisted into the 20th century, when the Suketi rani of Surender Vikram Parkash (r 1898–1911) went on a pilgrimage to Ayodhya, Mathura, Paryag, Kashi, Jagannath, Dwarka and Rameshwaram (Singh 2007: 374).

The apparent religious frenzy among Sirmauri royals went hand in hand with the ongoing establishment of thakurdwaras in the kingdom. Apart from the ‘Noni’ institution (circa 1713–49) and the temple at Ramkundi (1767 CE), a certain ‘nobleman’s thakurdwara’ or ‘mian ka thakurdwara’ appears to date back to this era (Singh 2007: 215), while the ‘dei sahiba thakurdwara’ (1889 CE) that was founded by raja Shamsher Parkash’s (r 1856–98) sister still houses images of Krishna alongside a stone image of Raghunath (Dilaik 2013: 127). All these institutions (thakurdwara) came under the authority of the Jagannath temple in Nahan. One exception was of the mahant of the ‘Noni’ site, who held independent charge for a period in the past (Singh 2007: 192). The considerable revenue of the thakurdwaras from both tax-free land and followers’ offerings was thus managed and directed by the mahants in Nahan, which no doubt augmented their status and economic power.

For the masses who could not afford to undertake a pilgrimage to holy sites as Sirmauri royals did, the thakurdwaras offered an alternative to generating merit (punya) while retaining economic integrity. The creation of these alternative pilgrimage sites did not necessarily spell the replacement of the indigenous centre, but rather established a link with wider cosmologies by elevating local centres to subcontinental status (on a similar pattern in Kangra, see Sharma 1995). The coeval expansion of thakurdwara institutions in Sirmaur and the ubiquitous identification of Jagannath with Krishna in the 18th–19th centuries evinced a constant evolution of devotional religion in Sirmaur. With Rajput patrons on the one hand and lay followers on the other, erstwhile bairagi ascetics ensured their relevance to state and society through a combination of political
savvy and ritual service. And while the officials in these temples have since come under government authority, their history reveals a wondrously complex tale of migration, ritualisation, and adaptation that reverberates in the hills to this day.

Conclusion

30 Firstly, following the declaration of Jagannath as a state-deity by the Khurda kings in Orissa, the invocation of the deity by aspiring rulers helped to secure the authority of local magnates across the North Indian landscape. In Sirmaur, the patronage of Jagannath earned the Rajput Royals of Sirmaur respectability among their peers in the North Indian elite and powerful allies among bairagi ascetics who hailed from their Rajasthani homeland. The story of Jagannath in Sirmaur differs in several important respects from the one about western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan based-deities, such as Raghunath in Kullu, who were established in the western Himalaya in the early modern era (Moran 2013: 6, fn 14). Raghunath held supreme position over all presiding deities in Kullu whereas Jagannath was not a state deity in Sirmaur. Even the highly charged atmosphere in which Ramanandis worked as a religious-cum-military force in other areas of the region is absent in Sirmaur. Sirmauri royals departed from the classical ‘conversion story’ about rulers’ religious beliefs, which is encountered in places like Kullu where the raja effectively shifted his religious orientation to embrace the deity (Moran 2013: 2), whereas the change in attitude towards Jagannath in Sirmaur was gradual. Thus, while the Sirmauri chronicle concedes that the deity was brought to the kingdom by none other than the raja himself, the establishment of a new capital in Nahan is ultimately linked to the religious specialist who facilitated this transition rather than to the deity from Puri. In this respect, the Sirmauri narrative conveys a more realistic assessment of the process than the fantastical accounts of Kullu. Sirmaur rulers did not ‘convert’ to devotional Vaishnavism but rather patronised its proponents.

31 Secondly, the Puri deity was never granted official control of Sirmaur despite its prominence throughout India. Instead, Sirmauri royals sagaciously patronised numerous religious creeds, ranging from that of pan-Indian Shaiva Naths – who enjoyed important positions in state – that balanced the parvenu Vaishnava influence in government, to the effectual indigenous cults that controlled vast areas in the higher hills (Moran 2019b: 7). Finally, the establishment of a new temple to Jagannath in the 18th century and the rise in thakurdwara establishments up until the late 19th century attest to the multidirectional spread of the creed from both royal and popular poles of society. The autonomy of these establishments in the kingdom attests to the exceptional diplomatic skills of their specialists (Mukherjee 1980: 16) who both provided their Rajput patrons with links to elites beyond the hills and worked to gain a following in the Sirmauri masses.

32 As elsewhere in different periods throughout South Asia, there were and are many perspectives, each operating in a complex fashion in relation to others (Sax 2002: 164). In Sirmaur, the arrival and acceptance of the eastern god Jagannath recalls an era of princely integration and competition in the Mughal Empire. And while the importation of the deity may have seen the latter’s newly adopted patrons collaborate with a politically powerful class of ascetic bairajs from Rajasthan, sustaining worship of the deity was ultimately ensured by the astute incorporation of alternative creeds (Shaiva,
indigenous, etc) in the Rajput state. By the modern era, the identification of Jagannath with the rising Krishanite sect saw the religious specialists of yore further their influence by establishing links with the extensive economic network of western thakurdwaras. Established by royals and frequented by the masses, these sites of devotion may perhaps also be appreciated now for the remarkable historical legacy they represent.

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**Interviews and communications**

Mahant Sh Krishannath. Kalisthan temple at Nahan was interviewed on 28 March 2021.

Sh Ajay Bahadur Singh of Sirmaur. Mail and whatsapp communication between 8–19 June 2021.

Surender Sharma. Priest of Jagannātha Temple at Nahan was interviewed during the period October 2019 to 5 November 2020.
1. The political feature of the geography (of the Orissa and Bengal region) in the 12th century hints at a regular tri-partite struggle between Orissa, Bengal and the Vijayanagar empire mainly for the River Mahanadi and for Godavari doab (Eschmann 1986: 147).

2. On the settlement of Brahmans as an indispensable part of sovereignty in Orissa, see Kulke et al (1986: 127–8).

3. Catherine Asher recently showed, using literary sources, that Kachhwahas did not build temples outside their homeland and that it was only due to patronage by Akbar that kings of Rajasthan built temples in Varanasi and Braj (2020: 4).

4. Man Singh Kachawaha became the greatest temple builder of North India at the time, flaunting his Kachhwaha lineage by constructing temples outside the Braj Vaishnava circuit and showcasing his loyalty to the Mughals by celebrating military victories that promoted Mughal expansionist policies (Asher 2020: 17).

5. For details of visits by kings between the medieval and early colonial eras, consult the Madala Panji (Singer 1958: 19–20 and 30 fn ii) and JSV (Satyanarayan 2005: 48–61).

6. The Tarikh-e-Riyasat (1912 CE) refers to James Tod’s Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan as a source. Tod mentions that Sal Bahan-I, Rawal of Jaisalmer, captured and took possession of the Punjab Hill States. His successor was raja Rasaloo. Incidentally, one of Rasaloo’s grandsons was called Surmor. It is not known whether this name has any bearing on the origin of the state but there are places with names attributed to raja Rasaloo, the second son of Sal Bahan-I, such as Rasaloo-ka-Pahar, a hill in Dewan Kot near Ambala in Tehsil Nahan (Tod 1873: 217).

7. Interviews with Sh Surender Sharma, priest of Jagannatha Temple in Nahan, were conducted during the period October 2019 to 5 November 2020. He narrated several stories containing a mixed bag of facts and myths that were to be corroborated later with other evidences.

8. The dilapidated wooden structures are still lying in a store room in the present temple. The first images were brought by Karm Prakash I in 1621 CE. However, we are not sure whether the original pieces brought by raja Karam Prakash are lying here or not. Communications with Shri Ajay Bahadur Singh took place between 7–19 June 2021.


10. There are largely recurring links between rulers and sadhus in Bhatti Rajput history. In his account of the life of Deoraj, the predecessor of Salbahan-II, Tod (1873: 202–3) notes that the ruler changed his title from ‘Rao’ to ‘Rawal’ by a certain baba Ritta, a Nath (‘knafera’ or ‘split-eared’) sadhu. Tod also notes that Jaisalmeri rajas used to don ochre robes and kundal earrings in the manner of Nath ascetics and that their coronation was similarly performed by the latter (Tod 1873: 202–6).

11. As regards the date of the temple’s construction, the chronicle (and information based on an interview given by Ajay Bahadur Singh) holds that it was built by Mahi Parkash (r 1659–78; cf Singh 2007: 208–9). The Gazetteer concurs in the identity of the raja but dates the temple construction to the period between 1664 and 1684 CE (Kapur 1934:11). This supports the assumption that the temple’s construction was ordered by
Mahi Parkash but only completed under his successor, Medini Parkash (r 1678–94) in 1681 CE (Singh 2007: 189).

12. The introduction of the rath yatra in Nahan on the very same dates as the celebrated event in Puri, for example, only became known from the 1960s onwards. Interviews with Sh Surender Sharma of the Jagannath Temple, Nahan, took place on various occasions between October 2019 and November 2020. For further information on rath yatra in Nahan, see Singh Census of India 1961 [XX-IV]8: 58–59) and ‘Bhagwan Jagannath Yatra 29 June ko’ in Amar Ujala, 24 June 2014.

13. According to the current mahant, the successors of Sanghi Rikhi Das (probably circa 1676–1700) were Narayan Das (1700–65), Kasi Das (1765–78), Ram Krishan Das (1779–83), Madhav Das (1783–1843), Mohan Das (1843–1896 CE) and Lakshman Das (1896–1900 CE), the latter’s term of office being cut short due to mental health issues.

14. The information comes from an interview with the current mahant of Kalisthan temple, Krishna Nath, which was conducted on 28 March 2021. The mahant also provided a copy of the ‘History of Kalisthan temple’ (no year) which, despite a certain vagueness in the facts, is largely corroborated by the account of the royal chronicle Tarikh-e-Riyasat, Sirmour (Singh 2007).

15. A visit was made to the storeroom inside the temple and pictures were taken of two sets of idols and mahant’s belongings on 4 November 2020 by Neelam with due permission from the authorities.

16. The temple was founded to commemorate the raja’s victory over the forces of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and his conquest of the tract, which is nowadays situated in Haryana (Gupta 1939: 206).

17. See also the village report from Moginand (1961), which reports performances of rath yatra processions in Nahan in the same way as in Puri. This tradition remains practically unchanged.

ABSTRACTS

This paper explores the multiple agents and processes behind the integration of the cult of Jagannath of Puri into the western Himalayan kingdom of Sirmour circa 1600–1900. It argues that the transition of the cult from Orissa (now called Odisha) to the hills was crucial to the formation of Sirmour as a modern Rajput state and that this process was closely assisted by the involvement of politically savvy ritual specialists from Rajasthan. Relying on a combination of a close reading of local histories and on-site interviews, it explores the actions and motivations of Sirmour’s rulers, their subjects and representatives of devotional Vaishnavism in the establishment of a multi-religious state. The establishment of thakurdwaras associated with Krishna in the kingdom’s core regions during the 18th century illustrates the continual evolution of both rulers and priests towards embracing the cultural changes affecting modern India. The representation of these seemingly disparate elements in a single historical narrative ultimately helps to situate the emergence of Himalayan states within the broader context of state-building in early modern South Asia.
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Keywords: bairagi, Jagannath, state-building, Rajput, Sirmaur, Nahan, Orissa (Odisha), Khurda, mahant, thakurdwara, Vaishnavism

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