

HINDU NATIONALISTS AND LOCAL HISTORY: FROM IDEOLOGY TO LOCAL LORE

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This article analyses how the Hindutva ideological programme on history-writing is concretely implemented at grass-root levels by an RSS-affiliated organisation. The organisation's name is the Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojna. The area of fieldwork moves from its RSS headquarters to its Chandigarh branch and to its Kullu branch. The primary objective of the article is to shed light on the multiple forms of mediation of the organisation, which show how Hindutva influence in local society cannot be simply reduced to the direct effects of its militants' actions. It also examines how the Hindutva discourse on history infiltrates the local conception of regional culture, merges with pre-existent conceptions and encounters specific forms of resistance. Finally, the article suggests the importance of understanding the Hindutva rereading of Indian history in the light of other post-colonial historiographies, engaged in a similar effort of placing the locality within a wider and prestigious framework.

OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS quite a virulent debate has animated the circle of Indian historians who have actively denounced and deconstructed the rewriting of Indian history by RSS-affiliated organisations.¹ Most of

1. RSS is the abbreviation of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, "Association of National Volunteers", a militant organisation for the propagation/diffusion of Hindutva ("Hinduness"). The aim of the organisation is to build a new (and strong) Hindu people/nation. Its members' training is paramilitary. The RSS is the real core of the other organisations that together form the Sangh Parivar ("family of the Sangh", with reference to the RSS), a journalistic expression for the complex network of organisations formed around the RSS. Among these, one is a political party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, "Party of the Indian People"), and another is a religious organisation, the VHP (Visva Hindu Parishad, "Universal Hindu Congress").

this effort has been focused on the way the RSS's vision of the past is ideologically affecting school textbooks or academic institutions. The question has also been raised by historians regarding some famous places — such as Ayodhya — the history of which has been ideologically reworked by Hindu nationalist writers.²

By contrast, little importance has been given to the impact that RSS-affiliated organisations are having on local history, i.e. on history which is not on the school curriculum, and does not affect renowned and nationally controversial localities. Local history is indeed usually ignored by academic historians, since it is related to a village or a remote area, it is orally memorised and narrated by ordinary people, and it has been recently put down in writing by local authors. It is a kind of history which is indeed considered as being separate from the historical discipline, as it is intermingled with local stories, the protagonists of which may be human beings as well as heroes or local deities.

For these reasons, however, local history does reflect a vision of the past which may in the end prove to be more permeable and more suitable to RSS's history-writing, which programmatically uses the repertory of Sanskrit religious texts — such as *Veda*, *Purāṇa*, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* — as the base of its methodology.³ Indeed, RSS leaders have paid particular attention to local history as noted by Romila Thapar who once solicited the reactions of professional historians:

Many of us who belong to the secular tradition don't really have a feel for local history. [...] I believe the RSS is engaged in a massive project of going into local history. I think in the next ten years, they plan to go into

2. For detailed criticisms of the Hindutva rewriting of school textbooks, see for example Delhi Historians' Group 2001; SAHMAT 2002; Saigol 2004; Sundar 2004.

3. The relation between myth and history is an object of controversy, as it is shown by the titles of the articles published by both the sides. Thus, for example, in the pro-hindutva article *Mahabharata: A Myth or a Reality* by Prasad Gokhale (1994) the author wants to prove the historicity of *Mahābhārata* by using different argumentations, including the utilisation of modern sophisticated technology. For the other side, there are articles like *Historicizing Myth and Mythologizing History* by Udayakumar (2005) or *When mythology becomes history* by the Hindustan Times Editorial (2002). This debate becomes however even more complicated if we consider that the opposition between history and myth is today reformulated by some academic historians. I refer here to the work of Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam (2003), where the authors show how it is possible to find out a "historical consciousness" even in those literary genres that include mythical elements.

each district, each local area, and produce their versions of local history. It is therefore necessary that secular historians and groups also take serious interest in understanding local history (Thapar, “Communalism and History”).

Since the 1970s, indeed, one of the RSS-affiliated organisations has created branches throughout the country with the specific aim of collecting and writing history on a very small-scale level, i.e. a district, a town, or a village. The name of this organisation is *Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojna*, which can be translated as “The Plan (also in the sense of Committee) for Collecting History⁴ of the Whole of India”, hereafter ABISY.

This article sets out to examine the concrete way in which the ABISY is pursuing its project and what its impact is on people’s perception of local history. In more general terms, my concerns lie with the gap between an ideological programme and the way this programme is concretely implemented when it reaches people at grass-root levels. The case described here indeed shows how an organisation which is completely committed to the mainstream Hindutva ideology at the level of its main leaders, owes its efficacy to the participation of people who, in different ways, get involved in its local project for reasons which may have nothing to do with political ideology. Some of the people I will talk about, especially at grass-root levels, are neither concerned with politics nor with RSS, and they may be involved in the ABISY’s local project just out of their liking for regional culture and for being personally concerned by the rewriting of local traditions.

The effective capacity of the RSS’s people to interact with those who may not necessarily share their political vision has already been noted by Fuller (2003) and Bénéï (2001). However, Fuller himself observes that very little ethnographic data is available on the subject and that it is then difficult to obtain greater knowledge of the matter. Yet, this is a very crucial issue if we want to understand not only the effective dynamics of mobilization of Hindu Nationalists, but also the multiple forms of mediation and resistance to the movement occurring at the local level, which make even political opponents often dependant on the Hindutva’s ideological influence. In other words, by studying these forms of mediation and resistance, this article wants to go further in the analysis of the assumption

4. The term *itihās* (lit. “once upon a time”) is translated in the English version of ABISY’s works as “history”.

that Hindutva influence in society cannot be simply reduced to the direct effects of its militants' actions.

The multiplicity of mediators involved in running the project at the local level is also at the origin of what has been described by Hansen (1996) as the “vernacularisation of Hindutva”, that is the way in which Hindutva takes different forms and meanings according to specific local and regional dynamics. The non-homogeneity of Hindutva is now well established among academic scholars. Not only, as Ludden (2005, xiv) pointed out, “Hindutva has many histories, and maybe as many meanings as locations” but, even in the same region, it may assume different meanings according to the different organisations which may be simultaneously active in a region.⁵

By exploring the form Hindutva activity takes on through the ABISY in a specific regional context — that of Himachal Pradesh — my attention will be focused on what Simpson (2004, 136) calls “Hindutva in action”, which “edge[s] the discussion away from the political stage” and towards the cultural and regional activity of Hindutva organisations. The study of Hindutva cultural mobilisation in a region like Himachal Pradesh, moreover, may counterbalance the tendency to study Hindutva in those areas where RSS-affiliated organisations are more visibly present and more violently active. Despite exploiting the recurrent aggressive slogans against the “threatening Other”, an RSS organisation such as the ABISY has identified the Aryan issue in this region as the potential element for involving local people in its cultural activism. Their aim is to show how local culture is nothing but the cradle (if not the birthplace) of Vedic and Aryan culture. Hindutva organisations assume that Aryans and Vedic civilisation originated in India and that the theory of an Aryan Invasion is but a myth invented by Westerners in order to legitimate their own colonial claims (criticism in Thapar 1999). I will show how this burning issue, which has been provoking a concerted and vigorous reaction amongst many Indian and Western academics, “fits in well” with the cultural and geographical context of the Kullu region. In fact, along with the common idea that Himachal Pradesh is situated at the periphery of mainstream Hinduism — which is often used by the local elite to explain its cultural specificity — this Himalayan state is a suitable “imagined landscape” (Eck 1999) for supporting ABISY’s rereading of the local past in the light of a “pan-Indian” textual repertory. The many references to the Himalayas in

5. On the cleavages between the RSS affiliated organisations see Jaffrelot 2005.

Sanskrit epic texts, as a favourite place for *ṛṣi*, heroes or gods to come to, do give a certain consistence to the idea of a reinterpretation of local lore in a “pan-Indian”, sanskritised framework. The textual reference to the Himalayas has indeed been taken as the starting point by the Kullu ABISY’s leaders for their cultural activity in the area.

This process of interpreting the locality through an ancient prestigious past is not specific to Hindutva. Indeed, another aim of this article is to show the difficulty in differentiating what has been directly influenced by Hindutva from what is due to different and sometimes longstanding processes of reattaching local lore to a wider textual-based tradition. Furthermore, this process is not specific to India either. It may be compared, for example, to what Harneit-Seivers (2002, 15) defines as a way for postcolonial historiography of “transcending the local” placing it within a wider framework. In a collective volume on what the author calls “new local historiographies” in Africa and South Asia, he shows indeed how “new local historians”⁶ try in both cases to construct an homogenous community not only by defining it in opposition to groups in the immediate neighbourhoods, but also by searching for prestigious origins (ibid.).⁷ In a similar way, the insistence of Hindutva writers in denouncing the West for deforming national history and the appeal for an indigenous historiography apt to produce a feeling of national unity are found in exactly the same terms in the African nationalistic discourse (see Falola 2004, ch. 6). Finally, and independently of post-colonialism, the political construction and utilisation of folklore was at the very heart of the of XIX century’s European nationalisms (See Thiesse 2001).

Notwithstanding the theoretical importance of considering the Hindutva project on history-writing in the light of other nationalistic historiographies, my aim here is to examine ABISY’s activity by using an ethnographic approach, more apt to take into account the complex and specific dynamics of Hindutva cultural rooting. The first part of this paper will involve studying this RSS organisation by paying particular attention to the way it works from a practical point of view: by looking at the network

6. With this expression Harneit-Seivers (2002, 3) refers to members of the local educated elite who have a “strong *biographical connection* to the locality or community they deal with; most of them are *non-professional* historians operating outside of academia”.

7. Contrary to Hindutva writers, however, for whom the prestigious origins are found in an ancient but autochthonous past (that of Vedic culture), local African historians frequently look for prestige in distant and non autochthonous places — in the Middle East, in Egypt or in Israel.

of people acting at different levels, from national leaders to their grass-root intermediates. The area of fieldwork moves here from ABISY's headquarters situated in the RSS headquarters in Delhi, to the Chandigarh branch (in Panjab) and to the Shimla and Kullu branches (in Himachal Pradesh). In the second part, the analysis will focus on the Kullu district and on the way the ABISY's national programme has been adapted to Kullu's cultural specificity. I will show the peculiar way in which the ABISY's ideological vision of Indian history infiltrates local conceptions of Kullu history, how it melts and becomes mixed up with pre-existent conceptions and how it encounters local forms of resistance.

1. THE ORGANISATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

To introduce ABISY, it is not improper to speak of an ideological or organisational centre in relation to its local branches. Its central place is located in Keshav Kunj, the Delhi RSS headquarters. This centre is linked to a leader, Thakur Ram Singh, a 92-year-old man who has dedicated his life to instigating and propagating nationalistic feelings.

Thakur Ram Singh is a *prachārak* (lit. "preacher").⁸ He lives in a room-cum-office in Keshav Kunj and regularly attends the RSS's meetings in Nagpur. In his role as ABISY leader, he also used to attend every seminar held by the ABISY's local branches in the different regions of India. Notwithstanding his old age, Thakur Ram Singh is very active. He travels all the time by bus or train, going to near or distant places, thus representing a crucial link between the national and the local level of the organisation.

Until recently, Thakur Ram Singh was ABISY's president, but the charge has now been assigned to Thakur Prasad Varma, a retired historian of the Banaras Hindu University. This charge is somewhat nominal, however. The real leader, in fact, undoubtedly remains Thakur Ram Singh, who is defined as a guide (*saṃrakṣak*) in ABISY circles.⁹

The way Thakur Ram Singh tells his life story bears some similarities with the way other *prachārak* do this (Jaffrelot 2005, 61ff.). After having passed an M.A. in History in Lahore in 1942, he refused his director's offer for a lecturer position there, thus giving up his personal career to become a full-time *prachārak*. Unmarried like all *prachārak*, he was first assigned to

8. *Prachāraks* are full-time executives who constitute the organisational backbone of the RSS (cf. Jaffrelot 2005).

9. The central secretary of the organisation is Kaushal, another *prachārak* who lives in Delhi and who also participates in the Nagpur's meetings.

Kangra, his native place, then to Assam in 1949. He was *prachārak* in Assam for 22 years, learning Assamese. He was then transferred to the Keshav Kunj campus in Delhi, where he became president of the ABISY.

The importance of having a leader is shown by the fact that, since its origin the organisation has made reference to a founder, Baba Saheb Apte, one of Hedgewar's first *prachārak* in Nagpur. In fact the organisation officially came into being one year after Baba Saheb Apte's death, when in 1973 the *prachārak* Moropante Pingle founded the organisation in Apte's memory. A photograph and a short biography of Apte are to be found in all the brochures illustrating the origin and the aims of the organisation.¹⁰

Another centralising element of the ABISY is also the copyright name used in most publications (books, reviews or booklets). Some of these publications are dedicated to exposing the ideology which is behind ABISY, its purposes, its methodology and its main projects.¹¹ In some cases the author/editor may have given his book to a local printer whom he has personally contacted and paid without receiving any financial help from the organisation. In other cases, especially when the publication is considered to be of national relevance, the author may have received some funding. This is the case of publications considered to have a certain prestige such as *India's Western Lands. The Saga of their Occupation by Foreign Invaders (From Vedic times to 1210 AD)* published in 2000 by Sukhdev Singh Charak.

The author himself writes in his preface:

This work is of national importance. I, therefore, find it proper to accept the offer of the Bhartiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti,¹² Jammu and Kashmir, for its publication. The Samiti is already doing a lot of constructive work in the field of collecting material on History in the light of a new reformed ideal of a national outlook under the guidance and inspiration of Shri

10. Some of the articles written by Baba Saheb Apte have been published in the form of a book. Cf. Shri Baba Sahab Apte 1947.

11. The titles are, for example, *The problems in Indian Historiography. Leftist Lapses in the Writing of Indian History* by Guha, or *Distortions in Indian History* by Raghunath Prasad Sharma. Others deal with projects considered crucial for supporting ABISY's main ideology, such as *Vedic Culture and its continuity: new paradigm and dimension* by Shivaji Singh or *Discovery of Source of Vedic Saraswati in the Himalayas* by W.M.K. Puri.

12. Amongst ABISY's publications, those of regional interest come under the copyright name of Bhartiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti.

Indresh Kumar [...] Above all I am thankful to Professor Ram Singh, President Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana, who has been encouraging me to finalise this work and to recommend it to the J&K Samiti for publication (Charak 2000).

References and acknowledgements to central members of the organisation are found in all ABISY's publications, where Thakur Ram Singh may also be asked to write the volume's preface with ABISY's name and Delhi address.¹³

The ABISY also publishes a journal, the *Itihas Darpan* ("The Mirror of History"), which is edited in Delhi. The journal has already issued almost fifteen volumes dealing with thematic topics, such as "Bhakti in Our Ancient Lore", or with regional topics, such as "Orissa culture, history and society". Most of the articles are written in English, but at the end of each volume, there are a few articles written in Hindi. In the inside cover details are given in English for contributors who want to submit their papers to the Journal. The editors pay particular attention to giving the Journal a "scientific character". Reference to a "scientific" framework is repeated throughout their draft programme — the importance of making reference to sources, and to proving with documents what is put forward.

The emphasis on what is "true" or "scientifically proven" also characterises Thakur Ram Singh's discourse on local history — the main domain of ABISY's research activity. In his declarations, in fact, Thakur Ram Singh is explicit about the fact that not every local history is worth studying and documenting, but only those facts which have a "historical basis" and which are in accordance with ABISY's ideology. In this sense, he makes clear that what ABISY is studying and collecting is not strictly speaking local history, but "oral" history, a history which, similarly to the Veda, was not originally written but revealed by the sages and learnt by heart. Later we will see the form that this specific discourse on proof and the scientific base will indeed take in the Kullu cultural context.

I will now briefly present ABISY's view on history such as it emerges from the exchanges I had with Thakur Ram and from ABISY's official brochures and booklets.

13. This is the case for example of a volume entitled *Uttaranchal Himalaya. Anthropology, Archaeology, Art, Botany, Economics, Geography, Geology, History and Sociology*, edited in 1995 by Maheshwar P. Joshi.

2. IDEOLOGY OF HISTORY AND “CENTRAL PROJECTS”

In the inside cover of the review *Itihas Darpan* a few lines disclose the aims of the organisation as follows:

The main aim of the “Yojana” [ABISY] is to rewrite the history of our country, Bharat, starting from the beginning of our existence up to the present time. This rewriting will be in accordance with the chronology of Bhartiya Kalaganana of Yugas, based on true and correct facts and figures, devoid of any prejudice whatsoever. Furthermore, this rewriting will be done in the light of modern scientific research and new archaeological findings in order to bring about a true, integrated and comprehensive history of our country, including all social, cultural, dharmic, spiritual, economic, political and all other remaining aspects of our national life.

Many booklets and brochures published free of charge or at a very low price expound ABISY’s conception of History. The methodology and theoretical framework presented in these booklets show many similarities between ABISY’s vision of history and the one adopted by the Vidhya Bharati¹⁴, with the difference, however, that ABISY is not involved in the revision of school textbooks. Here are some of the main points: (1) the deformation by Westerns of Indian history; (2) the necessity of writing an Indian/Hindu History based on the ancient texts of India; (3) the production of a national conscience of India’s glorious past, which is an Aryan past and (4) the denunciation of the damage caused by Muslim and Christian “invaders”.¹⁵

Moreover, in one of ABISY’s manifestos entitled *ABISY: Concept and Working*, the projects of interest at the national level are presented: (1) a project on how the Indians calculate time (*bhārtīya kāl gaṇna*), which is considered to be scientific as opposed to the Western calendar, based on

14. Vidhya Bharati (“Indian Knowledge”) is an RSS-related organisation founded in 1977 to co-ordinate the network of Shishu Mandir schools which the RSS has been developing since the 1950s (Jaffrelet 2005, 217-218). See also Sarkar 2005.

15. As it has been observed by Fischer-Tiné (2003), RSS’s discourse on History is deeply influenced by the thoughts of the Arya Samaj’s reformists. Among the authors of this period such as Ramdev’s *Bharatvars ka itihas*, for instance, we find a discourse extremely similar to the one pursued today by both the Vidhya Bharati and the ABISY (Fischer-Tiné 2003, 117).

Christian religion; (2) a project on the Sarasvati river, which would show the existence of the Vedic river using modern scientific techniques (such as Nasa satellite photographs); (3) a project on the *Mahābhārata* war, supposed to precede the *kali-yug* by 36 years, thus being “the Sheet anchor of Hindu history”. Other projects deal with “The Date of Birth of Buddha”, “Is Samdrottus Chandragupt Maurya?” or “History of Ancient Cities through the Ages”. In another ABISY brochure 25 projects of “general interest” are mentioned, most of which deal with “distortions”: “distortion of Indian literature and languages”, “distortion of Indian chronology”, “distortion in modern education”, with even one on the “distortion of Indian nationalism”.

Apart from these national-level projects, which ABISY has in common with other RSS-affiliated organisations involved in history-writing (like, for example, Vidhya Bharati), the specific aim of ABISY is to elaborate small-scale projects concerning regional, district, block and town levels — what are called ABISY’s different “units”. They provide with “guidelines” those who wish to collaborate on this project, giving practical suggestions on how to collect data in an exhaustive and systematic way. In one of these manuals, for example, they insist on the fact that the data collection should involve ordinary local people rather than outside people:

Local people have more information about the customs and the traditions of their own area and they can get material more easily than outside people. They can understand and choose the material according to the milieu. This type of collection will be much more reliable than work done by people from outside (Shri Baba Saheb Apte Smarak Samiti c. 1990, 6).

Thakur Ram Singh constantly repeats that this data collection is a “long-term programme”, and that it has taken “35 years just to show that distortions have been made”. They consider to have just prepared the “organisational structure”, the “background” for (re)writing a “true” History.

Before looking at the way in which this local data collection and history writing may tie in with the national project, I will now show how the organisation works in practice by creating a network of intermediates operating in the different “units”.

3. THE TERRITORIAL NETWORK OF THE ABISY

Each year ABISY sends its members a memo notebook. In the first pages of the booklet a list containing “some important addresses” illustrates on

a first level how ABISY conceives its presence throughout the national territory. To start with, the list presents all the addresses, telephone numbers and “responsibilities” of almost twenty Central committee members, dividing them into “*saṃrakṣak*”, “*mārgadarśak*”, “All India president”, “All India vice president”, General Secretary, and so on. The list continues by giving 13 *kṣetra* (“provinces”), such as *dākṣiṇā*, *paścim*, *madhya*, *uttar paścim*, etc. Each *kṣetra* includes two or more states.¹⁶ Let us take, for example, the *uttar kṣetra*, where I worked during my fieldwork. The *uttar kṣetra* includes Jammu-Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab.

The President (*saṃgathan mantri*) of the *uttar kṣetra* is a certain Sher Singh, a well-educated man of about 60 years old who lives in Panchakula, near Chandigarh. Sher Singh is not directly concerned with history-writing, he is not a writer and his role is more that of coordinator, someone who has to ensure that everyone is active, who has to follow up the activities and facilitate contacts within the *kṣetra*. Although he shares the RSS vision of Indian history, he is neither implicated in the RSS meeting nor involved in history-writing. In his role as *kṣetra*’s president, Sher Singh has to know and to maintain contacts with the different presidents of the states, districts or towns, but he is not perceived as someone who is particularly linked to a locality. And his being an outsider is presented by Thakur Ram Singh as a way of guaranteeing that he will not select people in accordance with some personal network but for the advancement of the national cause. As he told me, “they have to think of the nation and not entangle themselves in family matters”.

When a unit has to be formed inside the *uttar kṣetra*, Thakur Ram Singh contacts Sher Singh or other local coordinators in order to find out who would be the appropriate person to preside it. When a person has been chosen, a seminar is organised in order to celebrate and publicly announce the nomination of the new unit’s president and the other official positions.¹⁷

Inside each state within the different *kṣetra*, the list gives the names and the addresses of each president and secretary of the unit. Although absent from the list, the institutional network goes much further, as far as the district, block, town units. In order to create a unit, a president must be cho-

16. Cf. the ABISY’s website, <http://itihasabharati.com/index.html>

17. A common occasion for these nominations is the *Itihās Divas*, the “Day of History”, an ABISY special seminar organised every year in all ABISY local branches. The date and topic of the *Itihās Divas* are the same for all branches and are decided at national level.

sen and with him a vice-president, a secretary, a vice-secretary, a treasurer, etc. — so that the official creation of a unit indeed involves the formation of a micro circle of ABISY local intermediates, from where the branch's activity can start. Thakur Ram Singh used to talk of all these units presenting them, somehow, in terms of conquests: "We got 350 out of 832 districts [...] we got 6 out of 11 provinces [...] we've got about 900 historians, and we've got 6 full-time historians, devoted to this".

It should be noted, however, that some of these units are branches only on paper, empty offices. One of these empty units is for example, that of Mandi, a district near Kullu. When I visited the place, I was effectively able to meet the Mandi ABISY president, a retired doctor very busy with his private clinic and quite reticent to talk to me. The secretary, a lawyer and rss member, explained that both he and the president had recently been appointed to their respective positions during a seminar that Thakur Ram Singh (the Delhi leader) had organised in Mandi. He told me that, contrary to what he knew about the Kullu unity, no activity was operating in their unit. According to him the reason for this was that most of the people in Mandi have a government job and that, since the Party in power was currently the Congress, they want "to be with the government". According to him Mandi people "are scared that those who join rss will be deprived of government privileges".

Thakur Ram Singh is aware that "some of these units are a mere formality, they do not function properly, are not active in their work". This kind of affirmation, however, is not intended to lessen the efficacy of his organisation in involving people at local level. What he wants to emphasise, rather, is the priority for ABISY to create for itself a background. "Whether all these units are working or not — he told me — that is another question. What is important is that a structure has been formed".

4. UNIT PRESIDENTS AND LOCAL PROJECTS

Once a local unit is created, a project has to be formulated, by choosing a topic of research that will be likely to involve the greatest number of people. These people, who will thus be involved in completing the project, have very different profiles. Their ideological commitment to rss and to the Hindutva ideology may indeed be very variable and even non-existent. I will draw the portraits of some of these intermediates, focusing attention now on Himachal Pradesh, and particularly on the region of Kullu, which I know better. Some reference will also be made to Punjab, especially to the Chandigarh Unit, where I did some brief fieldwork in October 2005.

Vidhya Chand Thakur and the “state unit”

The president of the Himachal Pradesh unit is Vidhya Chand Thakur, the previous secretary to the *Academy of Art, Culture and Language* in Shimla (the State’s capital) during the BJP government, which has been moved to the *Department of Language and Culture* in 2004.

From the point of view of Himachali people, Vidhya Chand is someone linked to the locality. Contrary to Thakur Ram Singh, who represents “the centre” — a superior but outside authority — Vidhya Chand is completely involved in Himachali culture. Although he shares some of the RSS points of view, Vidhya Chand is not involved in the RSS lifestyle. He has never attended the *śākhā* (the RSS’s training camps) and he came to know the ABISY quite recently, in 1990. At the time, when he was a language officer in Mandi, he was invited to an ABISY meeting on an occasion when Thakur Ram Singh (the Delhi leader) gave a seminar at the Kullu Arya Samaj school, the topic of which was Indian historiography. Finding the speech very convincing, he approached Thakur Ram Singh, who immediately made him district president. After some years, he was transferred to the Shimla academy, and made ABISY’s secretary for the whole of Himachal Pradesh. Unlike Sher Singh (*uttar kṣetra*’s president), Vidhya Chand is not just an organizer, only concerned with the practical achievement of ABISY’s network. He is also the author of several articles on regional culture. In 2003 he coordinated, for example, a volume on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, where he showed how a number of stories commonly found in the region are nothing but versions of the Valmiki’s epic. This was part of a larger project that the ABISY had also carried on in Assam, as shown by the volume *Ramayana in the North East*, published in 2002 after an ABISY national seminar in Silchar — and in which Vidhya Chand says that he found inspiration.¹⁸

18. In the introduction to this volume, Dr Sujit Kumar Ghosh (2002), General Secretary of the Assamese ABISY’s branch, after noticing how “people of the north-east, who have embraced Christianity, are divested of their rich Ramayana heritage” explains the objective of the seminar: “the people of north-east India at different stages of their socio-cultural and historical development had come into contact with the *Rāmāyaṇa* and adopted it. [...] although among different ethnic groups of north-east India this text survived mostly in the oral form, the objective of the seminar was to bring people together and help them discover their roots and feel at home with others in the country” (<http://www.hvk.org/articles/1098/0048.html>). Another speaker who took part in the seminar, Shri Kabindra Purkayastha, Minister of State or Communications, said that the classic work of Valmiki “cannot but influence even those vanvasis who might have been cut off from their roots. The Ramayana is a link in the chain of diverse cultures and faiths” (ibid.)

Contrary to the Assam project on *Rāmāyaṇa*, the aim of which was primarily to oppose Hinduism to Christian conversions, the aim of its Himachali version — as Vidhya Chand explained — was rather to show how Himachali people, although living in mountain and isolated areas, were not at all cut off from the “national tradition” as might be supposed. His idea was indeed to show how certain legends which are considered to be specific to Himachal Pradesh are in fact linked to an original, unique and pan-Indian source (that is to the Valmiki version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*).

It is not only local stories that Vidhya Chand wishes to lead back towards a pan-Indian textual repertory, but also village rituals: for instance, a fire ritual celebrated quite commonly in Himachal Pradesh, the *kāryārī jalanā*, is for him the popular version of *havan*, the fire oblations which are performed all over India, at the “national level”. Although the search for a homogenous cultural basis for cultural diversities has brought him into line with the common Hindutva discourse, Vidhya Chand on many occasions underlined that this should not be done at the expense of the specificity of regional culture. According to him, local stories and customs have their own history (*itihās*) and the link with this history must be maintained. He opposed this local approach of ABISY to the more radical and intolerant activity of the VHP, another RSS-affiliated organisation which is also active in the area. In his words “our [ABISY] approach to local history tries to preserve the original form. Local history — he told me on his own — should not be sanskritised”.

This kind of affirmation may partly be a rhetorical statement, especially if we consider some of Vidhya Chand’s articles where, as it will be shown below, he gives particular emphasis to interpreting local culture in terms of a “Vedic” or “pan-Indian” framework. It is a fact, however, that his ideological and nationalistic attitude does coexist with a strong emotional attachment to his local cultural identity.

The District Unit and the Kullu project

Regional culture is the very starting point for the ABISY local branches to elaborate the projects of their various units. According to Vidhya Chand, the topic of these projects must focus on what is perceived to be the main specificity of local culture which can stir people’s feelings and motivations.

Each district has indeed its own specific project. For example, in the town of Chandigarh (in Punjab), there is a project on 23 “historical sites” situated in an area “covering 40 to 50 km around Chandigarh, [where] the team discovered that the residents are sitting on 5,000 years of his-

tory” (*The Tribune*, 18 Sept. 2005). This will allow them to find an ancient Aryan-Hindu substratum to a recent and foreign urban construction. In the district of Kangra, south-east of Himachal Pradesh, the unit’s project deals with Trigarta, an ancient name for this area. One ABISY publication entitled *Yug-yugīn Trigarta* (“Trigarta through the ages”) translates Trigarta as “three valleys” which, as explained in the foreword, would correspond to a “distinct socio-cultural and political entity, [whose] history goes back to before Mahabharata” (Gupta 2001, 2).

I will give a more detailed example here by focusing on the district of Kullu. What is perceived here as being specific to the area is the strong attachment of the population to their village deities (*devī-devtā*). In Kullu, village deities represent a very important element in the perception people have of their history and of their regional and territorial identity.¹⁹ They are indeed considered to be local kings exercising their authority and justice over all those villagers who, independently of their caste, live inside their territorial jurisdictions — a village or a wider territory. Many village interactions on social and political matters “go through” these deities, who are said to express their opinions and points of views through their different representatives: people from the temple committees (formed mainly by high-caste villagers); institutional mediums (many of whom are of low status), and also through wooden mobile supports (the *palki*, palanquins) which are carried on the shoulders of ordinary villagers and which are supposed to move according to the deity’s will. How effectively a village deity influences the social and political life of Kullu people depends on a plurality of factors, among which is the importance that the deity has in regional history. For example, some deities are said to have played a special role in the consolidation of the Kullu royal family and they are particularly famous in the area. In other cases, villagers affirm the importance of their village deity by claiming the identification of this deity with a pan-Indian god, *ṛṣi* or heros. Such claims are crucial to the villagers, as conflicts between different villages frequently arise during festivals about their deities’ respective rank and honours (see Berti 2006).

When the project for the Kullu unit had to be formulated, Vidhya Chand Thakur, who is a native of this district and is himself a devotee of a village god, did not have any doubt: what should be placed at the core of

19. An evident sign of the territorial identity associated with these deities is the habit people have of writing the name of their own village god on their vehicles with self-adhesive lettering — so that you can immediately recognise the village where the vehicle comes from (Berti 2003).

the project was the identity of these local deities and the place they occupy in the regional past. This was indeed how villagers felt associated with their own past, and it would therefore be the topic which would make everybody in Kullu concerned about and keen to become involved.²⁰ What was underlined in the draft programme was not only to collect and record first-hand material on local deities, but also to show their “forgotten” Vedic, Puranic or epic origin.

However, the attitude of finding a pan-Indian equivalence to local deities is not new in Kullu. Brahmanic influences and different religious movements have affected these local cults for a long time, especially in more accessible villages or in the royal capital, where Brahmans were mostly concentrated. During a more recent period, British administrators first, and the local elite later, often established the same kind of equivalence.²¹ Thus, even before ABISY became actively present in the Kullu district, the local repertory of deities’ stories was often overlapped by a pan-Indian repertory, the one narrated in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* epics. In an article written by the Congress leader Lal Chand Prarthi, Health and Revenue Minister of Himachal Pradesh in 1970, for example, it is written that the Kullu landscape and local gods are to be considered in relation to ancient texts.

20. Another point that may be noted is the choice made by the ABISY Kullu branch to focus on village deities rather than on a figure like the royal god Raghunāth (a name for Viṣṇu), a god on behalf of whom the Kullu kings ruled. This comes into contrast indeed with what Kanungo (2003, 3294) observed on the Hindutva cultural activity in Orissa. Here what has been perceived by the RSS as a “crucial unifying element” through which pan-Indian nationalistic culture could be transmitted is the god Jagannāth, a Viṣṇu incarnation who has been made “the king of Orissa” since the 12th century. Similarly to what happens in the case of Raghunāth, the god Jagannāth remained throughout different historical periods “a potent rallying symbol, reinforcing the collective regional and ethnic identity of the territorially fragmented Orissa”. According to Kanungo, the RSS’s project in Orissa is thus to “channel the devotional and spiritual energy of the Oriya towards the Hindu Rashtra” (2003, 3297). There may be reasons why in Kullu Raghunāth has not been perceived as having the same Hindutva pertinence than Jagannāth. It is above all the fact that Raghunāth has always been identified as the personal god of the king. The relations that villagers have with him are quite distant and formal, and have nothing to do with the emotional and devotional feelings they have with village deities. We may imagine, moreover, that a different choice would have been made if ABISY leaders had come from outside — as with the *prachārak* in Orissa — and were not, as is the case, people rooted in local culture like Vidhya Chand Thakur or Davendar Singh.

21. As in other regions of India, there are in Kullu other factors of brahmanisation or standardisation of Hinduism: there are television serials of epics (Lutgendorf 1995); cartoons, chromos or calendars on Hindu mythology (Stratton Hawley 1995);

The name of the ancient land of Kullu can be traced back to the hoary past and there are several references to it in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Vishnu Purana etc. [...] There are quite a few significant legends connected with the Ramayana “Kal”. It was the privilege of a Rishi from the valley, called Shringa rishi, who had his ashrama near Banjar [a local area] to act as the purohit at the “Putreshti yajna” of Raja Dashratha as a result of which the great Rama was born [...] The valley come into being by a number of events and incidents believed to be associated with it during the Mahabharata kal. The Pandavas, it is said, visited this valley as many as three times (Prarthi 1970).

As far as the intention of the ABISY leaders is concerned, what seems to be new, however, is the intermingling of three factors: (1) establishing the local-pan-Indian equivalence in a systematic way and within what is presented as a “scientific research project”; (2) putting this project at the service of the ideology of Hindu nationalism; (3) involving in this research project not only the largest number of local intellectuals, but also people from different circles of society.

The way ABISY wishes to proceed was presented at the first seminar held in Kullu in 1998 and consists in calling upon people “in the field”, i.e. those who are linked to village temples, to collect and to create a written repertory of stories on village deities. In the directives given to village people on how the material should be compiled, particular emphasis is given to the collection and record of a particular repertory of gods’ stories called *bharthā* (“news”). These involve stories which are supposed to be revealed by the deities themselves who, when speaking in the first person through the voice of their institutional mediums, recount the episodes in their life: where they come from, how they came to settle in their temple, which relationships they established with the local kings, and so on. The particularity of these *bharthā* is that they are presented by local people as being secret in two different and sometime alternative ways. Firstly, most of them are recited by the medium with only the priest present and using “god’s language”, which makes them difficult to understand. Secondly, even in the rare cases where the recitation is done publicly, they are recited in a very low voice that nobody can hear.

ABISY requests temple people (priests and mediums) who have access to these secret performances, to help collect their respective god’s *bharthā* and to write them down on paper, even if they do not understand their exact meaning. The work of ABISY leaders will be indeed “to decipher” these *bharthā* (often just some snippets of them), and to reveal their similarity

with Sanskrit texts, by focalising on specific words or expressions. This would reveal the Sanskrit identity of the village gods. For example, the *bharthā* of Katrusi Nārāyaṇ of the Tarapur region is said to correspond to a passage from the *Skanda Purāṇa*, which allows them to identify this god with Skanda. The fact that the *bharthā* is recited not by an erudite Brahman who knows Sanskrit, but by an illiterate and low-caste medium is presented as proof that it is directly enounced by the god.

For ABISY leaders, the *bharthā* becomes the original source as well as the proof (*pramāṇ*) of the deity, for the very reason that it is revealed by the deity itself. In this sense, they consider *bharthā* similar to the Veda which, being revealed knowledge, is supposed to be a discourse of “truth” *par excellence*. Similarly to the Veda, *bharthā* seem to have all the qualities to fit in well with the Hindu nationalistic programme (Berti 2006). On the one hand, being secret and self-revealed, they are supposed to preserve deities’ stories in their most authentic and pure form, and to constitute a direct path for reaching ancient (and Aryan) Indian history. On the other hand, the fact that *bharthā* are pronounced in a secret or metaphorical language, which can be deciphered only by specialists, bestows on these specialists a special authority in proposing different kinds of parallelism between, not only the *bharthā* and the Vedas, but also — and consequently — between *bharthā* and scientific discoveries. ABISY’s discourse is indeed similar to the general claim among Hindu nationalists that “Hinduism is simply another name for scientific thinking” and that Vedas converges “with the contents and methods of modern science” (criticism in Nanda 2003, 65).

The king’s son and the “ṛṣi project”

In order to carry through the Kullu project on village gods, a unit was formed: a president, a secretary, a vice-secretary, etc. was named. After consulting Vidhya Chand Thakur, Thakur Ram Singh (the Delhi leader) decided to nominate Davendar Singh, the eldest son of the current Kullu *raja*, as president of the ABISY’s Kullu unit. Davendar Singh’s nomination was formally announced by both Thakur Ram Singh and Vidhya Chand Thakur during the seminar held on a “History day” (see note 14) organised in Kullu in 1998. The seminar — the main topic of which was “Counting Indian time” (one of the most important “national level projects”) — was organised in a very formal way; political personalities gave their speech and received honours, and local writers presented their papers. The presence of national-level representatives, the constant association they made

between Kullu and the Sanskrit literature, along with the official character given to the seminar, was effective in producing a context which “generated authority” putting the power of “myth and other cultural registers to effective use” (Hansen 2004, 21). The acts of the seminar were published in a booklet, with photos and messages of congratulations from many of the then BJP deputies or ministers — Advani to the fore — on the first pages.

The appointed president, Davendar Singh, although not an RSS, has an ideal profile. On the one hand, his father and paternal uncle are BJP politicians and quite influential at the local level. What is even more important, Davendar Singh comes from the royal family and his father, who is the current Kullu king, is the *mukhya kārdār* (“chief administrator”) of all local deities. The Kullu king is the *charībardar* (“staff bearer”) of the royal god Raghunath, to whom all village gods owe respect and obedience. Being the king’s son, Davendar Singh has a privileged relation with the village gods, which gives him the legitimacy to know deities’ stories, and to ask villagers the gods’ *bharthā*.

Contrary to Vidhya Chand Thakur, who belongs to the Shimla academic circles and who uses his linguistic knowledge to speculate on the possible links between local gods and “textual” Hinduism, Davendar Singh does not have the same intellectual background. He is rather an emblematic and locally renowned figure around whom a network of people who are ready to help him in collecting material on local deities may be built. He is himself a “man of the field”, who takes the time to go from village to village, talking with people, and collecting first-hand information. He is also a fervent devotee of local deities and totally involved in their village cult. From his point of view, being the king’s son, he feels directly concerned by the idea of including these deities in a nationwide project.

The first project finalised by the Kullu unit indeed focused on *ṛṣi* — i.e. those local deities who are included in the same general category of village deities (*devī-devtā*) but who are in fact identified as Vedic *ṛṣi*. As soon as the topic for the project was chosen, Davendar Singh, in his quality as ABISY president, sent a letter to many villages in order to invite people to pool resources for collecting data (my translation from Hindi):

Respected Sir,

as you know this holy place of Kullu is a place for *ṛṣi-muni* [...] This part of Kullu culture is an invaluable heritage of humanity and national culture. Today the passing of time has also affected our gods’ traditions for future generations. For this reason the Indian History Collection Committee has decided to collect information related to *devī-devtā* [...]. Along

with this programme a letter has been forwarded to you, since this important work cannot be completed without the cooperation of those people involved in gods' beliefs. So with regards to the work related to gods (god-work), I require your co-operation. Not only do I hope, but I am totally confident that you will join in this god-work with total conviction and will give your full cooperation and blessing to make this project successful. You may be sure that whatever material you send, the committee will mention your co-operation.

The project on *ṛṣi* is presented as the first part of a bigger research project which covers other village deities such as *devī* (goddesses) and *nāg devtā* (serpent gods). The result of the *ṛṣi* project was published in a volume with the title *Kullū kī ṛṣi paramparā*, under the ABISY copyright in 2005. The volume is edited by Surat Thakur, Professor of Dhrupad Music in a Kullu College and secretary of Kullu's ABISY unit. Davendar Singh and Vidhya Chand Thakur have also played an important role in its publication. In the three successive prefaces they wrote for the volume, the focus is put on three points: 1) on the fact that it is "proven with evidence" that Vedic *ṛṣi* have been wandering in the Himalayas, and that the knowledge of their history in relation to the region will contribute to the knowledge of national history; 2) on the need to collect traditions which are going to die out — a concern often expressed by ABISY members; 3) on the method of collecting first-hand material by going out into the field: the importance of having good informants, of checking different points of view among the informants, of discussing these data during regular seminars, and so on.

The volume is in fact a collection of 34 articles written by different people. During my fieldwork, I met most of these contributors and I became aware that the majority of them were neither concerned with RSS ideology nor with the ABISY national project. Many of them were temple specialists or administrators, who simply put into writing what they knew about village deities and temple traditions without bothering whatsoever about ABISY's ideological affiliation. Others had a more ambiguous position. This was the case of Hira Lal Thakur, a convinced Gandhian, and the Kullu director of the Khadi centre. In his office, full of Gandhi portraits, he made some parallelisms between RSS ideology and the Gandhi "*svarājya*".²² Although he

22. The idea of an appropriation or incorporation of Gandhian idioms into Hindu nationalism, especially in the idea of Deendayal Upadhyaya's "Integral Humanism", has been developed by Hansen (1999, 84-86). See also Zavos 2000.

declared that he was not concerned with RSS programmes and its purpose, he was firmly convinced that ABISY was doing “constructive and true work whose aim is to deepen our knowledge of Kullu deities’ history”.

The 34 authors of the book are the more visible part of ABISY collaborators. A wide network of village data collectors has been set up by Davendar Singh, and their individual work is acknowledged in the preface to the book. One of the more invisible intermediates is Rajan Seluria, a man who has a business near the Kullu royal palace. His office is constantly frequented by village people who come to him to have their wool cleaned or to get oil pressed from mustard seeds. He also recently set up an annex where people come to be cured by snake bites. He explained to me what he knew about ABISY and what his role was:

ABISY is based on gods and goddesses. They want to collect deities’ traditions and customs [...]. We help Davendar gather all this information and give it to him. He puts it into form and takes out some good material....When a villager comes to my office to have his wool cleaned or other work done, he has to wait; so we start chatting. I just listen to what he says without taking notes to keep him speaking to me. Afterwards, I write down what he said to me and keep the paper in my drawer. Then, when I have gathered enough material I give it to Davendar [...]. Davendar told me to collect material. He and I are very close. He told me that I have to write this book and I need material. I said why not? I will help you [...]. He also told me to verify that what people say to me is true or not by asking different people and by crosschecking their replies. Moreover, I talk with those people I know will not lie, who will speak their minds.

The book contains 34 articles — each article corresponding to a different *ṛṣi* who has a temple in a village in the area. Most of these *ṛṣi*, however, have a name which does not correspond to the ordinary one used by local people. The hypothesis is that the local name represents a linguistic deformation of a Sanskrit name. In some cases this local name may somehow resemble the name of a *ṛṣi* belonging to the textual repertory. For example, a god whom people call Koshu deū (god Koshu) is said to be Kaśyapa Ṛṣi.

By leafing through the volume, what immediately stands out is the difference between those authors who are clearly involved in Hindutva ideology, like Vidhya Chand Thakur, and those who are not. In the articles written by ABISY’s leaders, reference to the textual equivalence of the god is systematically evoked along with his local identity. In some cases

the textual reference is directly introduced by quoting some passages of a Sanskrit text. By contrast, in the rest of the articles the only reference to a textual identity of the god is in the title, but no reference is made to the textual traditions. What is reported here is just the local story of the god as well as the practices followed in its temple in a way similar to a detailed ethnographical report.

The inclusion in the volume of articles which do not have any pan-Indian reference at all may appear incongruent with the central idea of the project being to discover a pan-Indian basis for local culture. But in fact ABISY leaders do not seem to bother about this. On the one hand, people like Vidhya Chand Thakur or Davendar Singh are manifestly convinced that local traditions should be maintained since everybody — including themselves — is “emotionally attached to them”. On the other hand, when a village god is included in a book whose aim is explicitly announced in the preface — “to find out Vedic *ṛṣi*” — any god whose story is included in the volume is supposed *de facto* to be a Vedic *ṛṣi*. Moreover, the simple fact of including all these village gods in a volume published under the ABISY name, makes the programme progress and increases the visibility of the organisation. As Dayanand Sharma, a Kullu Brahman quite critical about Hindutva, explains: “During seminars they gather people to discuss a topic they feel concerned with, the main leaders give their speeches [...] somehow they introduce a feeling of national unity”.

The nationalistic effects of ABISY’s activity are at least true for people like Vidhya Chand Thakur or other ABISY’s local members. By contrast, from the point of view of grass-root intermediates, other aspects seem to be relevant in the project they participate in: for them ABISY is simply concerned with gods and goddesses’ culture — which merits all their sympathy and support.

5. LOCAL RESISTANCE: THE CASE OF MOLU RAM THAKUR

In the first pages of the volume *Kullū kī ṛṣi paramparā*, after the names of those who have participated in the project, there is a list of people considered to be *mārgadarśak* (“guides”). Among the latter there is the name of Molu Ram Thakur, a local erudite who, notwithstanding his name in an ABISY publication, may be taken as an example of a local form of resistance to the Hindutva ideology.

Molu Ram Thakur is the author of many publications in Hindi and English on different aspects of Kullu culture. He is not, strictly speaking, an academic, although he is often associated with Shimla academic cir-

cles.²³ From a political point of view, Molu Ram Thakur does not have the same ideological orientation as Vidhya Chand Thakur. Everybody in Kullu knows him as being rather from the Congress Party. However, as far as his publications are concerned, he has no explicit position to defend. What is important for him is — as he says — “the study of local traditions in a non ideological way”.

To take Molu Ram Thakur as an example of Hindutva resistance may be surprising if we consider the book he wrote in 2000, entitled *Vaidik-Arya and Himachal, Historical and Research Account*, where he defends the thesis according to which Aryans did not come from outside but were the original habitants of India. More precisely, for Molu Ram they originate from the Western Himalayas and he proves this by taking Himachal Pradesh as an example.

Although defending one of the ABISY’s crucial ideas, he denies any involvement in Hindutva ideology — and everybody in Kullu agrees on this point. He has also always refused to be a member of ABISY, in relation to which he defines himself as just an “adviser”. What he wants, he says, is to be sure that what he calls “Hindutva type” authors will not “corrupt the tradition”, or “saffronise deities’ local stories”. Notwithstanding his criticism of Hindutva, Molu Ram Thakur approves Kullu’s ABISY project as far as data collection is concerned:

ABISY people are not going about it in the right way except for the first phase [of their project], that is, the collection of different deities’ stories. I agree with their method of work but not with the results they obtain. [...] The RSS no doubt has its idea and its version [of history]; but ancient material has been collected by them and as an adviser I don’t want this material to be spoilt in any way. This is my idea, they need to analyse it in a correct way, without interpreting it in their own way. [...] The first thing we do is to collect and edit the historical background of each deity. The deities’ culture should not be corrupted. I could not tolerate that! If ever they write anything according to their own point of view, I will be up in arms.

Now, what does it mean for someone like Molu Ram Thakur to saffronise local gods? In fact, what he criticises is not the idea of looking for a Vedic and pan-Indian substratum of local tradition, since he has also made refer-

23. He has for example contributed to a volume published by Laxman Thakur (2002) of the Shimla’s Institute of Advanced Study which circulates in all international libraries.

ence many times to Vedas in his books or articles on Himachali culture. It is rather the fact that this is done in a systematic way for all local deities. This is a very important nuance, which it is crucial to understand if one is to find out the sometimes very subtle difference between those who accept Hindutva and those who criticise it.

In order to give a better idea of this nuanced but relevant difference I will take a short example. A point much debated amongst local writers, which is the topic of many lectures and seminars held in Kullu, involves Jamlū, a god whose temple may be found in different villages of the district. Villagers give different versions about of this god's identity. Not only villagers but local authors have advanced different hypotheses: Shabab (1996, 70), has identified him as a Buddhist god coming from the Tibetan district of Spiti. Already in 1916 Young reports that some Jamlū devotees identified him with "Jamad-Agni, the name of the ṛṣi of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* who sought rest and seclusion in the Himalayas" (Young 1916). As for the author, he emphasised Jamlū's association with Islam (ibid.). Reference to these different hypotheses about the origin of this god is quite widespread among villagers who happen to evoke them indifferently, with no ideological (or communalist) implications.

By contrast, it is when the god Jamlū becomes the object of a seminar — and especially of an ABISY seminar — that the question arises: the pro-Hindutva argue that all Jamlū are Jamadagni Ṛṣi and others, such as Molu Ram, say "No! Some of them are Jamadagni Ṛṣi whereas others are not". There is indeed real disagreement on this point between Molu Ram Thakur and Vidhya Chand Thakur. While Vidhya Chand constantly repeats in his articles that all Jamlū gods are Jamadagni Ṛṣi, Molu Ram seeks to show the contrary, considering that Vidhya Chand defended this idea in order to favour his ideological vision of the past. "Try to ask him [Vidhya Chand] how he can argue, from a linguistic point of view, that Jamlū comes from Jamadagni !" — he once told me.

The subtle nuance which sets apart these two positions is indeed even further complicated by looking deeper into their debate. In fact, if Molu Ram Thakur sometimes accuses ABISY members of making all local gods equivalent to Vedic gods — which is not the case for him — in other cases his disagreement is based on another logic. Let us continue with the example of Jamlū. For Molu Ram Thakur, those Jamlū gods who are not Jamadagni Ṛṣi are not "local gods" either; for him, they are not "simply" Jamlū gods. They are indeed the representatives of the god Yama (the god of death), who is also a pan-Indian god of the textual repertory. He gives the reason for this hypothesis in his articles (see Thakur 2002).

Now, this hypothesis is contested by Jamlū's devotees who honour these supposed Jamlū-Yama because, although Yama is a Vedic and pan-Indian god, they do not want their god to be associated with the god of death! Molu Ram told me that some Jamlū devotees have addressed some complaints by sending him a solicitor's letter, threatening to sue him in court if he publishes such a thing again in his articles. By contrast, these very villagers were very pleased and proud to see their god Jamlū associated with Jamadagni Ṛṣi.

Here again a distinction has to be made in order to avoid the risk of confounding attitudes which are in fact extremely different. The acceptance by Jamlū devotees of the "Jamadagni Ṛṣi equivalence" of their god is not due to the same "nationalistic" reasons which are behind Vidhya Chand's statements that all Jamlū are Jamadagni. It happens that both are saying the same thing, but not for the same reasons. Jamlu devotees are not bothered about nationalism — it is not their problem. The issue concerning them is to have their local god recognised, and to somehow obtain greater prestige for him. Or, in more accurate terms, what they are often looking for is to simply defend their god's prestige, so that it is not outdone by their neighbours' god. Thus, for example, in one of these Jamlū cases, the problem was to defend Jamlū's position in relation to a neighbouring village god whose name was until recently Sankrini Deo and who has recently been identified as the Vedic Śṛṅgā Ṛṣi. There is indeed a sort of chain reaction where, if a god changes his name, it will have repercussions on all the neighbouring deities or at least on those who are in competition with him for rank and honours.

The example shows how the project of the Kullu ABISY to find a "pan-Indian" equivalence to local gods is carried through in a context where the idea of this equivalence already exists independently of the Hindutva. This equivalence may even be produced and intellectually demonstrated by those who denounce those they call "Hindutva people" for systematically transforming these deities for some nationalistic aims.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The material presented here shows the difficulty in establishing the part played by the ABISY in relation to other coexisting attitudes of "transcending the local" by attaching the Kullu landscape and mythology to the textual repertory. The point has already been noted by Eck (1999 27), in her work on what she calls the "geographical sanskritisation" of an "imagined landscape". Eck points out how the attitude of many regional traditions

to attach local places and gods to wider Hindu mythic and epic themes has also been used in the construction of an indigenous Hindu sense of nationhood (and nowadays of Hindu nationalism), and how it becomes difficult to distinguish the two trends. This may be particularly true in a region like Kullu where, similarly to what Linkenback (2002) observes for Garhwal, it is an area with an extraordinary mountainous environment of pan-Indian religious significance.

However, as the case of Molu Ram Thakur illustrates, what can be found in informal discussions is the presence of a local discourse, mostly from the local elite, which allows the difference between what is perceived as a Hindutva attitude and what is not, show through. People's awareness of this difference should not be neglected. Indeed, contrary to what happens for more official and well-known history, Hindutva theories on local history in a region like Kullu are not likely to become the object of a public controversial debate. Even someone like Molu Ram Thakur, who explicitly speaks about the danger of a saffronisation of Kullu gods, will hardly express such a concern in his books or articles in these terms.

Another point to be noted is the specific form and meaning that Hindutva resistance takes on in Kullu. Here again the case of Molu Ram Thakur is significant, and shows a different way of reacting to Hindutva history-writing than mobilising academic, secular historians. Molu Ram's concern with the local past is focalised on gods and myths, and thus is not part of a secular approach to the local past. Nevertheless, he claims a form of resistance against communalist efforts to impose an ideological frame on history-making.

Finally, the data analysed here show the gap which exists between the ideological proposals of the ABISY central leaders, which goes with the general Hindutva effort to restructure indigenous religions into a monolithic, uniform religion (Thapar 1985), and the activity carried out locally by ABISY intermediates who, at very different levels, collect detailed ethnographic reports about ritual practices and gods' stories. People like Raja Seluria or Hira Lal Thakur provide a rich compilation of information concerning a region, which is not in their case ideologically oriented. Of course, in the mind of the ABISY central leaders this is just rough material, which will be used later by specialists to reveal or decode from the village specificities a more homogenous Hinduism. The paradox, however, is that in order to find out the Aryan uniformity of the Kullu culture, ABISY becomes the promoter of a project the result of which is to put cultural diversity into writing, purely at a village level.

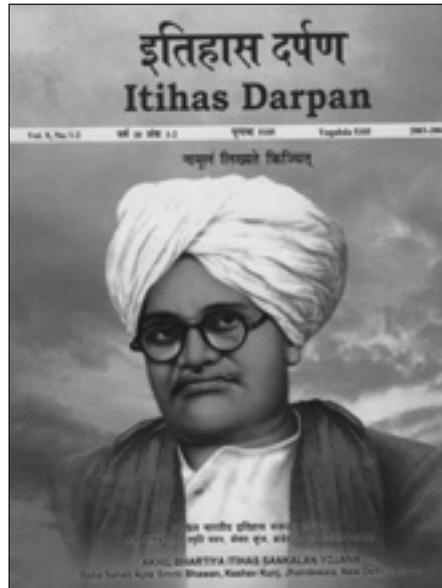
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