On a late afternoon in October 2001 the gods went to war on a large, dusty playground in the heart of a little hill town named Kullu, set in a narrow valley widely regarded by its inhabitants as the land of the gods—devabhumi. Police forces swung into action to contain the fracas. There was a lathi-charge: policemen equipped with a long, wooden staff, or lathi, used it to separate dissenting factions. When I first arrived in Kullu for my research in October 2002, just a year after the event, I heard constant—though unspecific—murmurings alluding to this incident, conversations that tangentially veered toward it, then awkwardly away. There was a general reluctance to elaborate on the circumstances that had led to such unpleasantness, and I could see that the embarrassment about it persisted during return trips up until 2004. The melee had occurred at Dashera,¹ the most important festival of the year in Kullu.

Ordinarily, Dashera is an occasion for renewing affiliations and reinforcing allegiances among the various gods that participate in the festival, traveling from towns and villages near and far. It is a time and place for feting and feasting the gods and celebrating their munificent presence in the mortal realm, the festival a symbol of the victory of good over evil. To clash on a day such as this carried a potent cultural charge.

The conflict itself, the significance of its timing, and the consequent discomfort in memory and social imagination are all important to understanding the frame of reference within which the events and processes described in the rest of this book unfold. They shed light on the imbricating circles of history, economics, and politics that define life in this Himalayan region. Faith and art are intertwined with—and implicated within—these prosaic circles of interest, enriching the

1 | INTRODUCTION
context and giving meaning to the relationships between and among gods and mortals. The culture that reflects this way of life and the history that shapes and sustains it have both been fostered by the harsh geography of the lower Himalayas.

**Topography, Chronicles, and Customs**

The Kullu district in Himachal Pradesh is nestled in the lower Himalayas; narrow valleys and steep hillsides cut by riverine systems are the most prominent feature of its geography. It is 5,500 square kilometers in size today and has a population of about 400,000. The valleys are at an average elevation of 4,500 feet, and passes as high as 10,000 to 12,000 feet are not uncommon in the ranges. The largest valley in the district is called the Kullu valley, and the capital town is Kullu too, set on the banks of the river Beas. It is one of the oldest principalities in the Punjab hills, and its population is primarily Hindu by culture and religious affiliation.

The original name of Kullu was Kuluta—an ancient kingdom that finds reference in several historical texts and accounts, and dates back at least to the first or second century CE. A vanshavali, or genealogy, of the Hindu rajas of Kullu lists eighty-eight names, taking us from this early period to the mid-nineteenth century, when the Sikhs took charge of the hills. The succession of kings appears to be of a single dynasty: Pals from the first until the fifteenth century, then Singhs—all Rajputs, with the name change seemingly superficial rather than indicative of a change of line. This long dynastic rule was preceded by the dominion of chieftains called ranas and thakurs, who controlled smaller portions of this large, hill-bound region relatively independently, levying taxes and waging wars, and sometimes owing allegiance to a more central power. Sustained rule of the region by Hindu hill barons followed by the establishment of Rajput principalities and the occasional foray of great Hindu kings from the plains ensured a certain continuity of cultural tradition and local lore, of religious affiliation and ritual practice. Through this time, local animistic beliefs and practices along with the worship of native gods and heroes—who are often saints and sages, ogres and demons—became enmeshed with the faith and ideology of classical Hinduism that traveled up from the plains. If there was an initial awkwardness of alliances between hill deities and those of the plains, the merging of divine histories and sacred geographies have found a keen balance in belief and praxis over time.

The present-day district of Kullu, lying south of the Rohtang pass and short of the border with Kashmir, is much smaller than the kingdom of antiquity, but it resonates with traditional political and religious linkages. Earlier relations between chieftains and kings—those hierarchies that dictated all interchange and alliance—are now echoed in the relations between neighboring villages and the district headquarters and among the gods that hold sway in these regions. These hierarchies are measured and maintained through symbolic and economic exchange, cultural and social ties of consanguinity and matrimony that bind populations between villages.
FIGURE 1.1. The congregation of the gods for Dashera at Dhalpur Maidan, Kullu

and within subregions. Festivals, local and regional, are the centerpiece of this exchange, and the Dashera festival is the biggest of them all, a weeklong celebration that is the primary locus of the annual cultural calendar of Kullu.

On the morning of the first day of the Dashera festival each year, hundreds of visiting gods gather in the large grounds at the center of Kullu town (figure 1.1). Some of these gods come from as far as 150 kilometers away—a distance to be respected in this difficult Himalayan terrain, as it is traversed by foot, with men taking turns carrying heavy palanquins of their village gods from their far-flung villages. They arrive in Kullu after days—sometimes weeks—of walking,
then wait their turn to pay homage to Raghunathji, the tutelary deity of the rajas of Kullu, to elucidate reciprocal relations of subservience and sovereignty, and to conduct transactions fundamental to such mutuality. Princely states no longer exist in India; kings and chieftains—rajas—are a thing of the past. Yet vestiges of their power remain embedded in the ceremonial aspects of such festivals and serve to reify abstract allusions to their status in community memory. Raghunathji is still the presiding god, his temple at the top of a short hill still the holy of holies. As in the past, favors are dispensed, obeisance accepted. It is like a dance that deciphers a frozen cipher anew each year, revitalizing a cultural affect through repetition. The persistence of this tradition is not gratuitous, nor is its replication entirely rigorous. Past patterns are partially overlapped by the slipping, shifting shadows of the dance, creating room for the articulation of difference from year to year. Members of the royal family, who are also often political aspirants in the present day, project these old relationships on to the new—democratic—institutions of our time, creating additional circles of interest and interdependence, conflict and contradiction.

And so it is that the Dashera festival continues to be a carnival of shared faith and fealty. At the start of the festival each year, all the assembled deities take turns visiting Raghunathji at his royal temple to pay homage and receive tacit permission to participate. This is the final stage of the processional journey that has brought them from their village tens of miles away to a dusty temple town and spurred them up the short hill to the royal temple, then downhill again to the festive ground. The ground is split into higher and lower sections; carriages congregate in the upper half to wait until all are hierarchically assembled, then make a ceremonial dash to the lower half at an appointed time and stay there for the ensuing week of festivity and favor. All the journeying in the world is represented by this journey, all power and prestige vested in it, all sources of well-being ultimately deriving from it.

The arrival and order of the gods at Raghunathji’s temple and, subsequently, at the grounds of the festival is determined by the proximity of their relation to the presiding deity, which, in its turn, is influenced by their sacral and political power within their own domain, by their economic clout in the region, even by their distance from the center of Raghunathji’s domain. Once they pay their respect at his abode (figures 1.2 and 1.3)—an unassuming temple not far from the palace grounds—they stop briefly at the king’s residence, then return to take their place in the upper ground, awaiting Raghunathji’s slow, ceremonial arrival, with the regal horse at the vanguard and men from the royal household bringing up the rear of his procession.

The visiting carriages align themselves in a strict hierarchy to the right and left of the centrally placed vehicle of Raghunathji, which is the only one with wheels, and start their short, swift run to the lower ground at an auspicious predetermined moment. This journey is critical in terms of the hierarchy it reflects, which may provoke or assuage both participants and the public at large but which will prevail until another year, another Dashera.
FIGURE 1.2. Interior verandah of Raghunathji’s temple, Sultanpur, Kullu

FIGURE 1.3. Visiting deities pay homage to Raghunathji at his temple
The sound of drums and trumpets, the surge and sweep of humongous crowds, the dip and rise of excitement in a tightly packed mass of reverence and revelry mark the raucous start of the festival week.

Each year the drama is reenacted, its component roles played to a pattern. The seemingly unchanging pattern reaffirms deeply held cultural beliefs, exalts continuities, and assures the endurance of commonly held values. In truth, each year also exhibits subtle changes, tweaking a well-understood piece to reflect shifts in political importance and authority, economic relation and regimen. The dynamism of the drama keeps it alive; the subtlety of change allows such change to occur, to be accommodated. When change is less subtle and the shift of vested powers more sudden, things can take an unpleasant turn.

Power and Protest

On that October afternoon in 2001, brief hours before the sun slipped behind the high hills of a narrow valley already half in shadow, one of the visiting deities, Balu Nag, realized that he had once again lost his place on the immediate right of Raghunathji to Shringa Rishi, another visiting deity. The source of this dispute goes back to half a century ago, perhaps more. For reasons not entirely clear, people explain that Balu Nag had refused to come to the Kullu Dashera for a few years; there are allusions to the indigence of villages engendered by a change in the pattern of revenue collection from the outer Seraj area (the upper part of Kullu valley), which is home to Balu Nag. Ceremonial traveling imposes considerable economic strain on sponsor villages, and his snub—a refusal to participate in the festival in subsequent years—was a culturally legitimate form of protest. But it did not sit well with Bhagwant Singh, the then raja of Kullu, who gave the place occupied by Balu Nag to another important deity from the region, Shringa Rishi. When Balu Nag was eventually appeased and invited again, he laid claim to his original position. To support such a reversal would mean a loss of face for Shringa Rishi, who, in his turn, duly protested the claim. Such disputes are refracted by the power and prestige of the deities involved. When they occur, they appear as specular moments in an already unfolding act, mirroring the structure of relations across caste and kinship groups, the modes of negotiation between various interests, and the subtle haranguing of power differentials—all within the confined physical and temporal space of the festival. Honor is a valuable currency in the hills, convertible to material and territorial gain—greasing the movement from the abstract (sacral power) to the actual (material manifest), in a manner of speaking. Religious precedence, thus, conveniently dovetails into economic and political preeminence. But none of these factors influence the resolution of dispute in a totalizing manner or as fixed, unchanging modalities of exchange. Political and economic interdependence form overlapping circles of interest and influence with endogamous unions and kinship affiliations, and their rival claims reveal complex, polyvalent relationships across the region.

In the particular circumstance of Balu Nag and Shringa Rishi, over the years, one or
the other deity would retreat from the affront to his pride that the dispute epitomized by refusing to participate in the annual festival. This has gone on for decades without resolution, and it continues to rankle and distress to this day. The advent of democracy has added one more circle of significance, creating pools of political solidarity that overlap, sometimes uncomfortably, creating alternate criteria for allegiance from those of sectarian, kinship, or economic interests. For instance, the set of villages that are beholden to Balu Nag do not fall in the voter constituency of the present raja of Kullu, a political aspirant in one of two major national parties in India; those that owe their allegiance to Shringa Rishi, in contrast, are a vote base, and expect, receive, and return favors accordingly. Over the years, the presiding members of the royal family have supported different deities depending on their political leanings, their desire to appease voter constituencies, and the weighing in of more local concerns, both economic and social. The tussle continues, sometimes—though very rarely—culminating in violence.

**Peregrinating Palkhis**

The annual visit to Kullu for the festival is not the only time that deities travel. They leave their temples to visit gods in neighboring villages and receive them in their turn. They travel to pay homage to “chieftain” deities, or *garhpati devatas*—gods who preside over a larger ambit than that of a village, generally tens of villages that form what is called a *bar*. They are often away from home for weeks or months at a stretch. The lower Himalayas, ranging to 14,000 feet above sea level, is rough terrain, where travel is difficult at the best of times. Carrying a heavy *palkhi* or *ratha* (the conveyance of the gods) on one’s shoulders, walking up and down mountains and mountain passes, can only make it more cumbersome (figure 1.4). Then there is the issue of reception: villages that host visiting deities, their functionaries, and the straggling population that accompanies such processions have not only to ceremonially prepare their own deity in anticipation but bear the further expense of visitors, cater to their stay for several nights, and make arrangements for festive meals.

Visiting groups can be twenty to thirty persons strong, and these hill villages are small settlements, with populations sometimes of fewer than a hundred and rarely more than three hundred people. There is an obvious economic strain, and the fact that such visits serve ceremonial purposes can only explain so much. It cannot explain the frequency of visits, for instance, nor their duration, where some deities are away from home for weeks or months visiting one village after another within a *bar*. It is the *bar* that offers an explanation: villages in it not only are committed to the worship of a common group of deities, they are related to one another through strong marriage and kinship ties. In this sort of relational terrain, the sustenance of exogamous village alliances relies on the visits of village deities across the entire group. Mortal ties are mirrored in the ties that bind the gods, entire villages represented by their deity on a *ratha*. The locus of kinship relations—of the hierarchies that hold not just at the festival
FIGURE 1.4. A procession in a hill village
but in each interaction of the gods with their mortal audience or with other gods—and of the ritual envelope within which this world operates is manifest in that ratha or what rests on the ratha: the mohra,\textsuperscript{14} or face-image of a deity (figures 1.5 and 1.6).

**Mohras—Multiplicity and Meaning**

Multiple images typically adorn a single carriage and represent a single deity (figure 1.7). The mohras that travel on the same ratha are vested with power through the same ritual practice and manifest a shared identity in the cultural imaginary. This collective life and collective identity of each set is distinct and separate from the identity of any other set of similar objects. The material and ritual biographies of such objects are important:\textsuperscript{15} they form a group of related images that have a shared purpose and history, and operate differently than do singular objects of piety. But any understanding of their relationship with one another is nuanced by the regular, periodic melting or dissolution, and the subsequent remaking of the objects. The newly made objects, consecrated again, lay claim to the antiquity and sacral power of the object they replace, which is believed to abide in them in essence. Thus, continuities of form
FIGURE 1.7. Multiple mohras on a palkhi
and function, the power of mimicry, the meaning of multiple representations, and the purpose of disembodiment all shape and are shaped by a specific cultural context in a particular geography. All the import of a mohra, its political, economic, social, and cultural significance, is wrapped around its religious role. Its making involves strict ritual swathed in rules of purity, auspiciousness, and symbolic sanctity. It insists on extensive social and capital expenditure at every stage: in the procurement of precious materials for the object, in the process of its manufacture, and in the celebrations that accompany its completion and consecration. This physical process of manufacture, including the dissolution of its earlier incarnation and the creation—a kind of renewal—of the object at hand, is an important theme of this book.

Before its consecration, the mohra is an object of aesthetic delight as much as of reverence. It is feted yet open to appraisal, commissioned collectively, and critiqued communally, the drama of the process of its creation a public performance rather than an isolated artistic activity. Performance, which is associated with feeling and sentiment, and consigned to an internal, expressive domain, is often placed in counterpoise to the more powerful external realm of economics and politics, which is associated with instrumental action.\textsuperscript{16} This is an epistemological seduction, where the opposition between performance and politics—expression and action—offers an enticing binary for debate and contestation. As has been argued by Tambiah, Bourdieu, and others,\textsuperscript{17} it is a false division; not only is symbolic capital convertible to cultural and economic capital, and expressive action, itself, deeply instrumental, but the process by which instrumental action triumphs often has to do with utilizing social capital. In the current context, where mohras and other appurtenances associated with the deity are both accumulated and symbolic capital, where performances of ritual renew and revitalize the social order in the human world as much as they do the physical object, and where meaning and function together constitute both object and ritual, such divisions are even harder to maintain. The power of performance and the value of cultural production in the signification of the political and economic ground blur the boundaries of the expressive-instrumental dichotomy, making fluid their component understandings.

The making of an object such as a mohra or an appurtenance for a deity is more intensely participatory than a public performance is ordinarily seen to be. The population that commissions the object, simultaneously a thing of material and metaphysical value, actively shapes it through discussion and dispute, criticism and defense, of both process and product (figure 1.8). The performative-dialogic component of this enterprise is articulated in a robust vocabulary of art criticism that exists not as a language of the culturally privileged, but as a shared matrix for customary discourse about such objects among patrons and artist. Understanding the modes of articulation of such criticism, the perception of features and failings, the subtleties of detail, the scrutiny, and the appreciation of such objects forms the second theme of this book.
A third is a concern with the idea of individual representation and with how the internal differentiation of a social structure that ritual serves to perpetuate and ensure may be resisted and complicated by the discourse generated by singular voices. In our context, this signal voice belongs to the artisan—and not by accident. The position of the artisan in Himachal society is a constantly shifting one, his pliancy of status a consequence of the work he does. (All artists and artisans who work for deities in Kullu are male; this is a hereditary vocation, passed from father to son.) During the process of the making of mohras or the various appurtenances of deities and palanquins, the artisan occupies a liminal place in society. He is insider and outsider, a low-caste person yet a member of society treated with deference during the ritual making of the object that is, itself, in a liminal state. It is ritually meaningful, and the artisan completes certain rites before touching it. But then he holds it in his feet for grip; he hammers, heats, melts, and molds it as an ordinary metal object. Members of higher castes surround him as helpers and

FIGURE 1.8. Sharing tea, a smoke, and stories
criticals. There is an intermediate space in the social imaginary within which both object and artisan reside during this period. Identity is contingent, not fixed, and the variable components of the context afford a flexibility to both meaning and appearance.

Although rituals are prescriptions that enact specific sequences of chants and rules of etiquette and worship with relative consistency of form, no performance can exactly replicate a previous incarnation. Every run of it is affected by variables such as audience participation, in terms of both scale and interest, the connection between the actors and the act, and other things, including economic constraints. So, the context of rituals not only begs analysis through the integration of several approaches, such as cultural interpretation; performance for the purpose of renewal and reification of codes and conventions, class, and relations; and consideration of the social, political, and religious contexts within which they occur, but also demands a reading through the status claims of participants that “make flexible the basic core of most rituals.” My particular interest is in this last: the status claims of participants and their modes of articulation. The ritual envelope becomes the ground on which is permitted a certain degree of ambivalence regarding the status of particular individuals; this ambivalence is articulated in very specific ways in the making and destruction of mohras and in the consequent insurance of an ordered social existence. The liminal state created by the ritual and stabilized through a belief in its efficacy makes it a powerful venue for the expression of resistance to the status quo, a projection of desire for change, and perhaps for change itself.

Two of the four ensuing chapters are organized around the two protagonists: object and artisan; a third speaks of the process of making that bridges their relationship, and a fourth of the aesthetic expression that animates their interaction. More than one object occupies an important place in the material culture of Himachal society, and the artisan in the spotlight here is hardly singular. But a specific object (with one other object described in lesser detail) and the trajectory of the work life of a particular artisan serve as exemplars in this book. A focus on the singular allows a meditation on moments in the process of making that reflect awareness of context, express intent and motive, and register shifts in perspective that stir the soup of generalizations.

Chapter 2 elaborates the ideas and intents that animate these objects. It discusses previous categorizations on the basis of style as well as the advantages and enduring limitations of such taxonomies and of the privileging of provenance and the particulars of the moment of creation. Material and ritual biographies of these objects are necessary for an understanding of their meaning. Since mohras, chhatris, and other embossed objects are periodically and regularly melted and remade, questions about continuities—both of form and of sacral power—the patterns of their use, the nature of their journeys, and the period of their creation or renewal all contribute to the frame of values within which they are received and understood.
The periodic dissolution and re-creation of objects undercuts at least two important aspirations of art history. The first is the desire to trace changes in representations over time because we consider objects to be emblematic of the milieu in which they are made. This is difficult to do if the material detritus of the past is ceremoniously destroyed at regular intervals. The second is the ability to study the stylistic corpus of a single artist. However, it strengthens the opportunity to seek an understanding of such worlds by extending the boundaries of existing frameworks to reveal other ways of viewing. For instance, dissolution and renewal permit the creation of a sort of palimpsest—the presence of many hands in a single set of objects that share a biography and, perhaps more cryptically, retain traces of companion objects in each new creation. There is no singular style that predominates but a collective expression that echoes the aesthetic.

Chapter 3 grounds the analysis of objects in an elaboration of the processes of making. Each stage of existence, with its attendant ritual, contributes to the meaning and merit of objects and of those who are associated with them. The process of making is where reception begins, where the relationships between artisan and object, patron or viewer and object, and artisan and patron are established. The fourth chapter deals with articulations and aspects of the aesthetic field within which this reception occurs. The interaction between artisan and audience—the parry and thrust of argument, the verve and restraint in observation and engagement during the making of the object—forms the basis for further questioning and consolidation of the circumstances in which a work of art may be seen to exist, its aesthetic value and meaning detected, and an aesthetic field perceived.

The fifth and final chapter is about the artisan, his role in society, and his engagement with his context. It is an exploration of what might constitute his self-identity—so tightly wound into the work he does—and the processes and practices by which it is repeatedly reconfigured. Caste plays a role, but it is the particular vocation of the artisan that enables him to work along the boundaries of such a classificatory system, to appropriate the threshold—a liminal space—and formulate new conceptualizations of identity and access within that system. These shifts, though transient, confer flexibility in the modes of communication available to the artisan and to his métier, infusing richness and complexity into the creation of meaning.