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Rethinking Civilisation through Non-Human Agency

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Abstract

Discourse on civilisation has generally propagated the idea of humans as the centre of the universe, the agentive force capable of bringing about social change. In the context of civilisational values, this paper seeks to privilege a more nuanced and intuitive perception of our world, like the one conceived by indigenous communities, over modernity's current manipulative perception of it. The paper references the Western Himalaya in India, where deities, as divine kings, assume both spiritual, political as well as juridical roles and continue to command social and political influence over Western-Himalayan communities. Though just idols or inanimate objects, they rally the community behind them, and become the society's custodians, especially in moments of ambivalence. This paper advances the argument that a reconceptualisation of civilisation must account for the narratives of not just humans, but also other species and objects, each of whom our ancestors imagined as having their own spirit, and their own story to tell.

Keywords: Anthropocentric, Agency, Modernity, Non-human Agency, Possession, Procession, Ritual, Western Himalaya

As the human species and as human beings, the very mention of the term civilisation instantly splits our thinking between 'states of becoming,' such as barbarism, savagery, a preliminary state of evolution of some sort, and our current state of progress and modernity. For many of us, the word civilisation alludes to a sort of primordial hot soup that we, and all other species on the planet found themselves in, out of which we humans somehow managed to extricate ourselves. And this act, we have come to believe, endowed us with boundless power to subjugate the rest of the natural world.

This belief has led to the idea of anthropocentrism, a term derived from the Greek words, *anthropos*—meaning human being, and *kentros*—denoting a centre. These two words combine to form the term anthropocentric, that gives us a philosophical view that humans are the most important and central beings in the universe. According to this view, humans are different from, and superior to nature. All other beings and objects have some value only if they help humans survive and enjoy life. This view is deeply ingrained in the thought, philosophy and political action of the present.

Ecological ethics and new anthropological insights like the Actor-Network Theory give us the counter-intuitive idea that this human centrism could be the main cause of all our problems, ranging from the capitalist concentration of wealth in a few hands, to the earth's climate change crisis. If we are indeed looking for a solution to these civilisational issues, we must first begin to recognise that the non-human world has value, and not only because it benefits humans in some way. Different objects and species may have varying characteristics, but these differences do not justify the thinking that any one species can lord it over others. This view recognises the intrinsic value of all living beings and non-human actors, rather than prioritising humans and their interests.

Decentring the Human

If, for a moment, we decentre the human from our perception of civilisation, we will begin to ascribe moral rights and obligations equally to humans, animals, microbes, even objects worshipped by archaic societies that the scientific world might consider inanimate. Habitats of other life forms, such as mountains, grasslands, forests and rivers, as also landscapes, shall appear to be of exceptional value, deserving our comprehension and compassion.

Contrary to the thinking of the moderns, indigenous communities have always ascribed value to other life forms as well as inanimate objects, keeping the window of possibility open for attributing agentive powers to them. This paper seeks to privilege, especially in the context of civilisational values, a more nuanced and intuitive perception of the world of our ancestors and indigenous communities over our current manipulative perception of the physical world. The paper, in order to make its point, references the Western Himalaya in India, where divine kings, as temple deities, assume both spiritual, political as well as juridical roles and authority, and continue to influence social life.

Himalayan *Devtas*

In the northern mountain states of India, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, the region generally referred to as Western Himalaya, deities are usually idols, or representations in the form of palanquins or masks. They are carried across long distances over treacherous mountain terrain on *yatras* or pilgrimages, and during these ritual journeys, they are expected to perform several tasks ranging from delivering justice, exorcising evil spirits, blessing newlyweds, solving disputes, approving electoral candidates, spreading auspiciousness, controlling the weather and bringing good harvests.

At times these deities possess their subjects, causing catharsis and healing. Communities invest large amounts of scarce resources in organising rituals around these non-human actors because they find their custodianship valuable. In turn, people who consider themselves their subjects, protect the forests, farmland and grazing commons as belonging to the deity. Life in these mountains revolves around, as most *pahadis* describe it, *devta-ka-kaam* or simply, the work of gods. Therefore, describing social life in the Himalayas is equivalent to

describing the connect between people, their *devtas* or divine kings as deities, the natural landscape, and the consequent ritual entanglements of procession and possession.

The Civilisational Problem

In a world influenced by the individualism of the west, agency, or the capacity for action and the ability to bring about social change, is ascribed only to humans. In anthropological discourse, agency is often ascribed to individual persons (Taylor 1995). Sax (2010) suggests that this human-centric approach is an outcome of the pervasive but unexamined individualism in Euro-American social theory. For several years, anthropologists have been struggling to explain the entanglements and interconnectedness of humans with their environment, and central to this discussion is the question of attribution of agency to non-human actors.

Ideas of modernity and anthropocentrism have contributed to the thinking that only humans can act as agents. Right from the times Marx and Weber coined the term, it has been assumed that every social group would follow a simple line of evolution, that the spread of scientific education and introduction of technology in our lives would lead to a break from the past, ensuring that primordial loyalties like caste, creed, belief systems etc. would be done away with. And yet, despite all our technological prowess and education, these connections do not seem to go away. In fact, our primordial loyalties seem to be deepening. Does this mean that we are deficiently modern, or that many of the assumptions about how modernity would impact the world have been incorrect? Could this also, in some way, cast a shadow over our attribution of agentive powers only to humans?

In the *Devbhumi*

Widely referred to as *dev bhumi*, the abode of gods, the Himalayas are home to several social groups that worship their gods by not just undertaking pilgrimage and making ritual offerings, but also by establishing close familial bonds with them. For instance, Nanda Devi or Gaura, Shiva's consort, is considered the *dhiyan* or outmarried-daughter of every household in Garhwal and Kumaon. Every daughter born, is therefore Gaura. Such is the relationship between people and the *devi* that after hosting her in the maternal home or *mait*, the entire region comes together every twelve years to undertake a 360 kilometres arduous pilgrimage on foot, in a ritual of sending-off the daughter to the abode of Shiva, her husband, into the Himalayan snows. A metallic face plate represents Gaura, and the forests this sacred pilgrimage (popularly known as the *Nanda Devi Raj Jaat Yatra*) passes through, are also, thus, Gaura's forests, making their violation in any form non-negotiable.

Though many sacred sites of the gods from the Hindu pantheon are situated in the Himalayas owing to glacial origins of sacred rivers being present here, people from the mountains feel a greater connect with their local village deities. These deities are usually idols, or representations in the forms of palanquins or face plates. They are carried across long distances over treacherous terrain on *yatras* or pilgrimages. During these ritual journeys, communities invest large amounts of scarce resources in organising them because they find

their custodianship valuable. People have, until today, protected the forests and grazing commons in these highlands as belonging to their *devi-devtas*.

Therefore, describing social life in the Himalayas is equivalent to describing the connect between people, their deities and their rituals. But in doing this, a few problems arise. Rituals, in a scientific world, are looked down upon as non-modern, even repetitive, meaningless activity. Describing a ritual as efficacious or attribution of agency to Himalayan deities is fraught with the risk of one's work being critiqued as orientalist. But the fact remains that rituals around objects continue to have powerful social effects. *Devta* idols and their representations continue to exercise agentive power in these mountains.

Walking with a Divine King

While walking with the processions of the deities in the Himalayas, I have come across the agency exercised by these non-human actors through processional ritual in the social, religious, and political spheres. From this, one can conclude that their agentive power must first be acknowledged, before it can be understood. Here, I describe one such procession of *Pabasik Mahasu*, one of the four brother Himalayan gods, whose jurisdiction extends in the catchments of the rivers Pabbar in Himachal Pradesh and Tons in Uttarakhand. Both rivers join the Yamuna eventually. *Pabasik Mahasu*, like other deities, actualises his realm through well organised chiefdoms run by village councils. At the head of the chiefdom is the *vizier* or minister, while the deities themselves speak through possessed human oracles, known as *malis*.

Walking with the palanquin of *Pabasik Mahasu* from his temple or palace in Thadiyar to village Chatra, I experienced how the god seeks to assert his sovereignty that is not just theistic but also politically significant. The kernel of the divine king's social power perhaps lies in this sovereign agency.

Thadiyar, located by the Tons River in Uttarkashi District, is the temple site, the prime seat of *Pabasik Mahasu devta*. This is where the deity travels from. When I use the term travels, I mean a *devta* carried with pomp and pageantry on a palanquin, in a procession by people devoted to him. Chatra is a village that lies in the upper reaches, about fifteen kilometres away, and one of the few villages from where the ceremonial priests of the *devta* come.

To initiate a procession and for the deity to rise from his seat and visit a village, several conditions must be met. For one, the village must unite and extend an invitation. This is easier said than achieved since many villages would want to invite the divine kings, primarily to end social conflict. The procedure for inviting the divine king involves applying to the deity's minister, in writing, with a small amount of money or silver as tribute. The minister proposes the visit before the god and reserves a date only after the deity's assent has been obtained through his possessed oracle or *mali*. The royal visit is an event of immense significance for the village as it affords an opportunity to display communitas (Turner 1967) by hosting extended families and visitors from all neighbouring villages. The sheer act of inviting and

feeding guests and expending scant resources responds to the performance of community sacrifice. To extend hospitality to every pilgrim is part of the *devta's* code.

It was after a period of four years that the village of Chatra had invited, and the deity had agreed to visit. The intervening period had witnessed bitter quarrels over land and property within the village due to fragmentation of lands and the specificities of inheritance. The situation had come to such a tipping point that members of the two principal landowning families had refused to even speak to each other even though they were neighbours. Young boys within these families, cousins, whose homes stood across a small compound, had grown up without even a word being exchanged, an unthinkable situation in isolated mountain villages where community living is of the essence.

On the appointed cold winter morning, *Pabasik Mahasu* began his journey to the village. Every family within the village had dispatched their able-bodied men to fetch the god from the temple at Thadiyar, down below in the valley. The estranged cousins had also come out of the deity's fear. The men from the deprived castes had arrived to lift the god's luggage, and the drummers and trumpeters to ensure the god rose from his seat and took the prescribed route. The Rajputs would get to lift their divine king's palanquin.

One could feel the nervous energy at the Thadiyar temple, as the entire male population of the village that had trekked to the village, waited for the god to rise. The moment arrived when the minister felt that the time had come for the procession's progress. The box-like silver palanquin had been readied with the divine king's idol concealed inside, wrapped in red cloth. First to be lifted out of the small shrine outside the temple complex was the *nisan* or symbol of *Kailath Bir*, the deity worshipped by the deprived caste groups, always accompanying *Pabasik Mahasu* as a protector. The symbol was a long iron tong with pieces of coloured cloth strung to it, accompanied by a bell fixed to a chain, that could be slung over a shoulder. As the drumming reached a crescendo, with the bearer of *Kailath's* symbol trembling with the effect of possession, all eyes shut in fear and reverence, and the assembled men touching their ears out of obsequiousness; the palanquin, with its poles bearing tiger heads in gilded silver, and draped in new, spotless white cottons brought in earlier by the host village, emerged from the palace of the *raja*, the temple. Having surveyed the courtyard, going around it a few times, the divine king was on his way, down the precipitous path to the Tons River, where it would cross on the swinging wire bridge and then take the winding path up.

The divine king's drummers led the way, playing vigorously even as the trumpeters raised the pitch announcing the procession. The minister stayed close to the palanquin. For most of the time, the palanquin, though carried on the shoulders of the high caste men from the host village, seemed to move of its own volition. As we crossed the creaking steel rope bridge across the Tons and reached a T-point on the pathway, the procession awaited *Mahasu's* decision on which way to turn. To everyone's relief, the divine king's possessed palanquin bearers decided to turn left. Had the palanquin taken the path to the right, it would have meant that the god wanted to visit his elder sibling at Hanol and the impatient hosts in Chatra would

have to organise a series of time consuming, expensive rituals through their representatives in the shrine of the deity's brother, before the god would proceed to their own village.

We continued to climb, even as the drummers kept up the tempo. At times, the palanquin would careen dangerously toward the deep gorges we were leaving behind. At other instances, it would surge ahead as if shifting gears. As we climbed and passed one terraced field after another, more men joined in the procession. Trying to stay ahead of the procession on the minister's insistence, and since I had a camera in hand, I almost stepped over a man lying on the gravel across the narrow pathway at the halfway mark where the god's procession was about to arrive. He had torn away his shirt and flagellated himself with stinging nettle (*urtica dioica*). He trembled, in a trance, obstructing the king's path. As the palanquin reached him, the oracle bearing the palanquin also became possessed. A protracted but silent negotiation, only through gestures, followed between the god and the squatter. The one obstructing the path had now begun to stretch out his limbs as if in a fit, refusing to budge and let the procession move forward, reminding one of Gandhi's *satyagrahis*, the protestors, who would symbolically obstruct the work of government in an act of civil disobedience in pre-independence India.

Finally, the god's oracle, now in a state of furious rage, asked for the symbol of *Kailath* to be brought before him. The enthusiastic lad carrying the symbol had meanwhile continued his ascent, not stopping for the negotiations. This led to a lot of shouting and name-calling until the rattled youngster sprinted back down the steep pathway to the palanquin. The divine king finally conferred *Kailath's* symbol upon the protestor, therewith making him a custodian of sorts. This satisfied the possessed protestor, and the procession was once again on its way.

The entourage moved on whilst the shadows between terraced fields already began to lengthen. And then, two women who had thrown off their *datoos*, the customary scarves that cover the heads and modesty of married women, and left their hair untied in a display of spirit possession, scrambled down the steep hillside, screaming and writhing painfully. It seemed like we had run into another protest. The divine king, resting on the shoulders of his oracle, heard out the unintelligible mutterings of the women, constantly comforting them through his oracle while also gesturing that they let him reach the village where he would address their complaints. Meanwhile, the first protestor, who now bore the symbol of *Kailath* on his shoulders re-entered his trance, jumping violently, constantly gesturing towards the palanquin as if questioning the god's motive in visiting the village.

After all the protesting spirits had been ritually pacified with the tossing of rice and placing the heads of their human vehicles under *Mahasu's* trumpets, the procession resumed its journey uphill. Finally, arriving at the outskirts of the village under the huge Peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*), the palanquin danced, as did the possessed spirits opposing his entry to the village. The diminutive shrine to *Kailath*, the deity of the lower castes, was believed to be here and this warrior of *Mahasu* had to be propitiated before the village could be accessed. Upon entering the village precincts, the palanquin was received by the village priests holding smoking incense in long ladles. This was followed by the yet to be married young women offering floral or banknote garlands to the palanquin.

The palanquin bearers, weary of all the climbing, seemed to be in a hurry to take the god and establish him at the ordained spot, but the divine king would have none of this. His oracle was clearly agitated over something. He declared that the divine king had decided to take a detour on the narrow, winding path leading to another point above the village. And up climbed the exhausted palanquin bearers. The palanquin travelled to the edge of a disused rice field on the upper hillside. Here, another tree stood at the edge, with dense bushes on the surrounding ground. The palanquin headed straight through the thorny bushes, and the bearers were instantly bruised and bleeding from the effort.

"Here, this is my land! No one dare encroach on it!" shouted the oracle in the shaking, high- pitched voice (*cheriya boli*) of the divine king.

Only then did the entourage notice that *Mahasu* was addressing the residents of a hut just below the edge of the precipice, until now completely concealed from view. The drumming and trumpets began to sound once again, followed by another round of loud cries from the god's warriors accompanying his procession. The deafening noise had the desired impact. Women and men, in a state of disarray, emerged from the cottage hurriedly. They pleaded before the palanquin that they indeed had been guilty of dumping some garbage at the spot, committing that they would ensure cleanliness in the future. The ruler had drilled some civic sense into his subjects.

Once again, we scrambled downhill with the procession, hoping that the divine king would now assume his designated place and rest for the night. But he had other plans. As he was about to enter the courtyard where he usually rested, the palanquin came to a standstill, and the oracle bearing it stood stiff as if turned into solid rock. The chief organisers of the procession came forward and pleaded, but to no avail. The god would not budge an inch. After a long hiatus, the oracle finally indicated that someone had climbed up the balcony of the house that fell in the immediate path of the procession. The offender had not just dared to climb to a position above the god, but was audacious enough to keep his shoes on. A gauntlet had been thrown to his supremacy. The boy was pulled down from the balcony amid some cursing. Forgiveness was begged for by the organisers and finally the procession moved.

While the procession had entered the village, the minister and a few elders of the village, exhausted from all the climbing, decided to sit on a platform, facing the courtyard where the divine king would normally camp during the night. They had been sunning themselves and chatting in the evening sun as the palanquin completed its clean-up drives. The fact that the village elders had assumed a position that would be higher than his own designated space infuriated the divine king. Another round of apologies and remonstrations ensued, but the god was not ready to accept this affront, this time involving his own chieftains, whom he thought, should have had better sense. The palanquin turned back, to take another round through the village. Every time the palanquin moved, it was accompanied with loud drumming and fanfare. People would fold their hands and then touch their ears, a gesture that usually indicates the begging of pardon. The platform was cleared of all squatters and the palanquin once again

entered the courtyard. The palanquin, borne by the oracles, rested for a few moments and decided to proceed on another round, as if inspecting the space, only to turn back in a few minutes.

This time again, everyone thought, the god would agree to settle in the village square, the communal space designated for the divine king. As the palanquin arrived, the bearers were jerked up the platform where the minister and the elders had been sitting and had offended their deity. "The *devta* would like to rest on the platform and not the square," announced the oracle. It was clear that the god would not settle on the ground while some of his subjects sat on a higher platform.

What this meant, to the consternation of all, was that *Mahasu* was now going to stay on the platform, a space that was an individual's occupied property and space no longer common to the entire village. The owner of the platform was quite rattled at the prospect of having to host the god and his entourage all by himself, and the social backlash this would lead to, once the god had left. He had already quarrelled with his kin across the courtyard, because of this unwarranted occupation of common space. They had invited the divine king to end the discord, and this move from the divine king could in fact, intensify it. He could not afford more bad blood and stand accused of usurping the god from the village. If matters were not resolved soon, the man would stand completely isolated within the community.

Bystanders averred that the man was in deep trouble and the *devta* would certainly bring upon him his curse (*dos*), despite claiming his hospitality. No individual familial unit, whatever the resources at their command, could ever hope to satisfy the divine king with their hospitality. And not being able to satisfy the divine king would invite his *dos*, his retribution, and make them recipients of his curse. The family looked very anxious. The entire village was worried. They had organised the visit to foster unity, and their divine king seemed inclined to accept an individual most responsible for the discord as the host. As the palanquin was placed on the platform, a fresh round of possessions, arguments and very serious negotiations ensued. The homeowner's wife was possessed and exorcised by the *devta's* oracle. The spirit that was leading to discord was pacified.

As the sun dipped and dusk set in, it turned out that the deity was not favouring this one individual but was upset that a public land had been occupied and that his own officials had forgotten the protocol due to a divine king. He was merely claiming the illegally occupied land, the newly built platform for the community, by wanting to settle on it for the night. The palanquin moved once again. The owner of the house-with-the-platform had sworn to demolish the platform within three months, and he was also asked to remove the steps leading to the platform, another act of forcibly occupying public land that had led to the dispute in the village.

The elders of the village now thought they had convinced *Mahasu* of their good intentions, and the palanquin moved decisively towards the compound where the divine king's tent is usually pitched. It moved a few steps and then stopped dead in its tracks. The oracle seemed oddly agitated. The village elders had to once again rush to the palanquin to placate

him. They touched their ears and bowed, hands folded before the palanquin and gesturing, as if begging forgiveness. However, no one could figure out what had now earned the divine king's wrath.

Finally, the oracle pointed to a signboard hanging from a balcony. The government's forest department, announcing a tree plantation project, had fixed the signboard. Initially, no one could comprehend why the deity would take offense at this inconsequential object. At that moment the oracle raised his voice loud enough for all to hear, announcing,

"*Tum meri praja ho; yeh mera kshetra hai!"*

(You are my subjects; this is my territory!)

The divine king was clearly indicating that he had sovereign rights over the village and if the people accepted him as the *raja*, he would not brook any competition from this trespassing entity called the Government of India. *Mahasu*, the *devta raja*, would not take this insult. He turned away again, threatening to return to his palace, the temple at Thadiyar, much to the chagrin of the entire village. The signboard was removed in a huff even as the palanquin toured the village once again. The elders rushed to the divine king with a promise that no government signboards would be permitted in the village henceforth.

The drums and trumpets sounded once again and the palanquin swiftly circled the courtyard twice, as if consecrating the sacred space. The *devta's* tent was pitched in the middle of the courtyard, with spires (*kalash*) over it, indicating the sacredness and royalty of the abode. With one final flourish of the drums and trumpets, the deity entered his tent to rest for the night. The feasting, praying and making of offerings began, since the village had been fasting until then. The divine king was finally satisfied and in repose, at least for the night, only to move on to another destination the next day.

Procession and Power

Procession rituals of the divine kings help construct worlds of meaning for their subjects. Undoubtedly, they are reminiscent of the ritual of conquering the quarters, in India, a ritual employed historically by certain groups of actors to retain hegemonic control over territory. *Devta* processions, however, while serving to mark sovereign territory and mobilising subjects, also serve to reinforce a sense of solidarity within the larger realm and underline the specific identity of the local, socio-spatial units in the overall federal structure of the *Mahasu* realm. Each place the procession halts in or is added to the divine king's itinerary becomes a part of the deity's expanding network. The logistics of the ritual, when looked at from the routine aspect of meeting the expenses for the ritual journeying, cost of movement and customary honorarium to be paid to ritual functionaries, reveals how these networks operate expansively. In removing the signboard, *Mahasu* had rejected the territorial sovereignty of the mundane state, claiming the divine king's right.

For the ordinary *Mahasu* subject, these celebrations provide a sense of identity and belongingness, an existential meaningfulness from the tutelary structure of which everyone is a part. The burden of economic support for these tours, both in cash and kind, falls over them in the form of ritualised levies, taxes and fines. The host populations must feed the large numbers of functionaries and officials accompanying the processions. Hosting the *Mahasu* procession is thus seen as an act of collective sacrifice.

Ritual journeys like these processions create sovereignty within the frame of what Ron Inden in his book Imagining India (Inden 1990) describes as "complex agency" of the deity and his collective institutions. What this effectively means is that though the divine kings may be non-human agents, they represent, the collective will of their subjects. It is this collective will that is manifested in processional rituals.

But the question remains whether our modern understanding of civilisation, emerging from the Latin *civitas* or city, where we generally associate the idea of civilisation with urbanisation, division of labour and modern ways of living, can accept the ascribing of agency to non-human actors?

Sax (2010, 90) has pointed out that the collective agency of divine kings is always distributed in agentive networks. On similar lines, Galey (1991, 133) remarks, "territorial control finds, more often than not, its legitimacy in relation to sanctuaries and to units of the cult that define social space ritually." *Mahasu* processions ritually connect the central geographical node of this agentive network, the cult capital of Hanol, with the entire realm. Berti (2008) has pointed out that in the Western Himalaya, territorial links are given priority over links of lineage, while Sax (2006) points out that politico-religious relationships are inscribed in the landscape by means of ritual. In his study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand, Tambiah (1977) characterised the field of power in the Indic kingdom as a "centrally oriented" polity rather than a territorially bound one.

Thus, through ritual journeying, the deity shows himself to his subjects and renews his connection with soil and territory while stamping his supreme authority over his subjects, confirming their unflinching loyalty, as a true marker of sovereignty. Wherever the processions are granted hospitality, the regions are interpreted as territory belonging to the divine kings. In this worldview there is no need for marking boundaries with fences and check-posts. A different conception of territory, as a centrally bounded but ever-expanding space, has enabled traditional sovereignty to co-exist with the modern concept of territory as a space where the external borders must be marked, physically with barbed wire and outposts, as well as on maps.

But the question remains whether and for how long can modern governments permit the co-existence of divine kinship? In these mountains, divine kingship is a social as well as political reality. The nation state has made inroads and established a certain degree of political control even as the overarching ritual presence of the divine kings remains the fulcrum of social life. Galey (1989) suggested that, in these mountains, relationships between king and subject are even today embodied in practice, in every aspect of life. During my fieldwork I realised

that despite tremendous change owing to factors such as roads, commercial apple monoculture, education, and tourism, life indeed revolved around a parallel indigenous idiom of rule by the divine kings.

With the arrival of colonial rule and democracy, the absolute political control the divine king exercised over the subjects may have come into question, but there is no denying the fact that the non-human divine is still a political force, and modern governments have no option but to grudgingly acknowledge it. In these mountain regions, divine kingship is not a mere metaphor, and Mahasu *devta-rajas* do not merely 'resemble' kings. They are rulers with agentive powers. The practice of ritual, in terms of ritual processions and temple congregations, questions academic distinctions between politics, economics and ritual. The processions incorporate all these dimensions. In fact, politico-religious relationships are inscribed regularly in the landscape of the realm by means of ritual. In these ritual journeys and their attendant rituals, the archaic and the contemporary, the political and the religious, the pre-human kingly state and the modern secular, co-mingle in several ways to create a shifting territoriality. This shifting territoriality, confounding modern administrators in general, has resulted in the survival of a stable sovereignty.

An Alternative Modernity

Modernisation theory has postulated that as the primitive turns into modern, people are likely to give up their 'primordial loyalties' (Geertz 1973), to caste, kin, tribe, religion and deity and adopt more secular forms of living. With better access to education and medical facilities and expanding networks of roads and communication, with people being more connected with the modern world, one would assume that the power of the old systems, irrational as they might seem to modernising groups, would somehow dissipate.

No doubt, in these mountain regions, there is radical change, with democracy at times aligning groups along the lines of political parties rather than clan and lineage groups. People increasingly seek medical help in hospitals rather than referring illness to their divine king. Courts have overtaken the divine king's juridical authority. With this happening and the secular state empowering deprived castes like the drummer-bards, ensuring that they break from tradition and no longer remain subordinated to the upper castes for sustenance, one might expect that the ritual polity would disappear, but it does not. One would expect that apple wealth and its consequent materialism would dilute people's loyalties and dissuade them from the outdated ritual into adopting ways of living that are more secular and mainstream. And yet, this is not the case.

Despite significant change in the economic, political and social systems, religious values, relationship to the divine kings, the associated knowledge of and belief in divine kingship remain deeply ingrained in the lives and practices of the divine king's subjects.

The discourse of globalisation has postulated an emerging world that is borderless, where identity is no longer conceived in terms of outdated models of nation, kinship or lineage. Even

though with the rise in populism and right-wing politics, the postulation that the global flows will subsume such identities may have become outdated, most political thought is driven by this very thought process. Today, people attach even greater significance to historic, ritually demarcated borders and identities. Traditional boundaries have not become redundant under new political dispensations. They may not be represented otherwise in atlases, land records or administrative papers, but these demarcations are retained in the minds of people. They are, in turn, performed and embodied during rituals.

The persistence of traditional systems, however, does not signify that the subjects are deficiently modern. In response to Sahlins (1985) coining of the phrase "indigenisation of modernity," to grasp the resourcefulness and agency of kinship-based societies in adapting new demands and inputs to meet their needs, Bergmann (2016) has pointed towards such groups that often uphold identities that challenge modernist agendas and simultaneously harness up-to-date technologies and categorical inventories to their seemingly palaeolithic purposes. In his view, peripheral groups like the divine king's subjects are "tactically selective about modernity." They adapt to new careers, education, means of transport and communication and forms of government, but do so within the ambit of their tradition, not rejecting it, but adapting their new modes of living to it. This modernity perhaps may not reflect the idea that globalisation would mark the decline of ritual.

Instead, this modernity of Himalayan communities has evolved with, to use Sax's (2009, 236) application of Sudipta Kaviraj's term, "a logic of self-differentiation" (2006, 497). Crisis and contestations within the society, in historical times and in the present, reflect on the "alternative modernities" operating within the social. This, in a manner implies that while people in the region have adapted to electoral politics, constitutional justice, biomedicine and new means of communication, they do not cease to be *Mahasu devta* subjects. People still subscribe to the divine kings' ritual practices because this fulfils certain needs that modern governments, and their agents are incapable of providing. This opens the field for recognising the agentive powers of non-human actors too.

Trans-Species Encounters

In his book, Sapiens, Yuval Noah Harari (2015) makes the tantalising claim that rather than humans—the "intelligent" species that believed they had domesticated plant species such as wheat, rice and potatoes to their immense advantage—it was in fact these plants that had cultivated homo-sapiens to their own advantage. Think for a moment about the global agricultural revolution from the standpoint, not of humans looking to feed millions, but from the perspective of crops such as wheat, potatoes and rice. Harari asks us to consider the position of wheat ten thousand years ago when it was just one of the many wild grasses, confined to a small patch in the Middle-East.

According to him, "Suddenly, within just a few short millennia, it was growing all over the world. According to the basic evolutionary criteria of survival and reproduction, wheat has become one of the most successful plants in the history of the earth. Worldwide, wheat covers

about 2.25 million square kilometres of the globe's surface, almost 10 times the size of Britain. How did this grass turn from insignificant to ubiquitous?" (Harari, 2015)

Harari's claim is that rather than humans cultivating the crop, it was wheat that manipulated them. Up until then, humans had lived quite comfortably as hunter-gatherers. Our immediate sibling, *Homo erectus* had flourished for more than two million years just this way. By 8000 BCE, when wheat was first cultivated, anatomically modern humans had survived just fine for almost two lakh years without it. Within a couple of millennia, however, humans in many parts of the world were doing little else, from dawn to dusk, other than taking care of wheat plants. And wheat demanded a lot of people making a lot of effort. Wheat did not like rocks and pebbles, so *Homo sapiens* broke their backs clearing fields. Wheat did not like sharing its space, water and nutrients with other plants, so men and women laboured long days weeding under the scorching sun. Humans guarded and protected wheat from insects, blight and rabbits, dug ditches and carried buckets of water to irrigate it and collected animal poop for fertiliser.

This had profound effects on humanity, not least of which, wheat forced humans to stop wandering and to instead become sedentary; emotionally and physically attached to their fields. In this way, instead of depending on myriad food sources and species, humanity got stuck with a single staple such as wheat, which is poor in minerals and vitamins, hard to digest, and really bad for teeth and gums. Who, then, has the agency to shape the social?

Wheat also messed with human bodies. Humans were, argues Harari, "adapted to climbing apple trees and running after gazelles, not to clearing rocks and carrying water buckets. Human spines, knees, necks and arches paid the price." He points out that the word "domesticate" comes from the Latin *domus*, meaning house.

"Who's the one living in a house?" asks Harari rhetorically.

"Not the wheat."

It's us, humans. Our homes and homesteads are our pig pens. Master wheat will not let us out, unless the butchers are out there. Now, that's a thought to consider over your morning toast.

Author Amitav Ghosh too has postulated in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2020) presenting the idea that certain plant species in nature play a central role in cultures and history. The ambivalence of the effects of a flower like poppy or a spice like nutmeg on the fate of human characters and of their perception of plants underlines the paradoxical power of the fragile creature. Through its various avatars, the entrancing poppy flower, or the aromatic nutmeg, displays its perverse influence on individuals and nations alike, and thus a thing of beauty is no longer a joy forever but became a cause for civilisational crisis. What comes across clearly in Harari and Ghosh's work is that humans and nature are not only

in competition for the same space, but also, and more significantly, that their mutual interdependencies are crystal clear.

The Problem of Agency

However, even as we come across indigenous narratives from Lord Shiva adorning himself with snakes to Buddha's moment of awakening under the Bodhi tree, stories of trans-species meetings, the illuminist idea of ethnocentrism has gained consensus and modern humans have failed to recognise how non-human agents inhabit and are crucial to their existence.

Consider the recent pandemic, where an unknown and invisible entity threatened to wipe out a large percentage of the global population. God forbid if one had to travel, one needed a pathology laboratory's certificate that one had tested negative. Never in time was there such a premium on negativity. But even if you felt healthy enough to travel and the microscope were to pronounce you positive, your world would come to a standstill. The consequences could range from prolonged isolation to long periods of medication, leading to the tortuous search for a hospital bed or life support systems. Extreme panic gripped people even when they felt healthy, when the microscope pronounced that they were carrying the virus. Now, in those moments of fear and uncertainty, we, and people around us experienced situations of abject surrender to a mere inanimate object of steel and glass, the microscope. From here arises the central question of ascribing agency to non-human agents. These could be microscopes in a pathology laboratory or *devtas* worshipped by social groups in the Himalayas. The agency exercised by non-human actors, at social, religious, and political levels, must first be acknowledged, before it can be understood. This creates some room for alternative cosmologies to emerge substantively.

Humans maybe susceptible to arrogance but what sets them apart is the capability of reasoning against it. What separates humans from the rest of the species is our ability to tell a story. Or maybe, as Ghosh (2020), said, humans are also capable of understanding what other creatures are saying to us, and our stories are only a result of this understanding. Perhaps our ancestors better understood this connection with nature and our growing technical prowess has made us arrogant enough to think of subverting nature for economic gain.

Charles Taylor in his books *Source of Self* (1992) and *A Secular Age* (2007) has criticised modernisation theory for its universal assumptions, of new modes of living subsuming the traditional world of spirits and divinities. According to Quack (2014), the idea of a secular age was opposed by Taylor in preference to that of an "enchanted world" in which spirits, moral forces, things, and words can transform independently of human beings, and where the line between personal agency and impersonal force, as well as between the physical and the moral, is not impermeable. Taylor argues that certain boundaries in an enchanted world—for example between "humans and things" and between "mind and world"—are experienced as porous and diffusive. Taylor, thus, offers a description of people as "porous selves" inhabiting an enchanted world, rather than the "buffered selves" living in a secular world as they are made out to be.

To those looking at the world of *devtas* from the outside, the divine king may appear to be just an idol, an object shrouded in mysterious secrecy that is venerated. To his subjects, however, he is an integral part of their enchanted world. To the observer he may appear as an inanimate figure, a 'thing' treated as a king. To the devoted subject, the divine king is an agentive force intrinsic to community life.

Much before Taylor criticised Modernisation Theory for its "acultural" assumptions, McKim Mariott, in his books Hindu Transactions (1976) and India Through Hindu Categories (1990) had suggested that any inquiry into a culture must apply categories derived from that culture itself. In other words, he was opposed to the universal application of Western analytical terms to indigenous cultures. Thus, he was advocating an indigenisation of theory and the employment of an alternative social science distinct to concepts inherited from the past.

French philosopher Bruno Latour (1991), has argued that modernity, rather than being an ontological fact, is an ideology. This ideology allows the so-called progressive people to claim superiority over their brethren, less fortunate in terms of scientific and economic advancement. Latour is critical of modernity's separation of nature from culture, of self from the other and of science from religion. Opposing these dichotomies, he insists that their mutual entanglements cannot, in any way, be separated. These inseparable entanglements are termed by him as networks of agency, technology, viruses, humans etc.

A new conceptualisation of civilisation, therefore, must account for the narratives of not just humans, but also sacred objects and species as imagined by our ancestors—objects and species with their own spirit, their own story to tell—their own agency.

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