



Village Deity and Sacred Text

Power Relations and Cultural Synthesis at an Oral Performance of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* in a Garhwal Community

A week-long festival centered on stories about the deity Kṛṣṇa was held in the hamlet of Naluna, Garhwal district, Northern India. This practice (known as a *saptāh*) is primarily a product of an elite Hindu community of the North Indian Plain. Two loci of power were identified: the village deity representing local authority, and the text-as-artifact of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, the metonymy of the authority of the recently imported cultural practice. The role of each locus and their interaction are considered. While earlier theoretical frameworks for understanding interactions between communities in the hills and plains have stressed dichotomies, this paper seeks to characterize the processes using a metaphor of hospitality. This approach, in which the local community is seen as consisting of modern subjects and empowered agents, accounts more accurately for the nature of the interaction between the village deity and the sacred text, and the new cultural synthesis which emerges.

KEYWORDS: *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*—performance—*saptāh*—village deity—*grām devtā*—Garhwal

AMID THE blare of horns and the beating of drums, a palanquin covered with scarlet drapes is carried on the shoulders of two village men. The central chamber of the palanquin, though empty, has a broad band of silver metalwork, and is topped with a matching silver crown. Lengths of multicolored brocade swing from side to side as it sways and bobs. This palanquin is the vehicle of the local village deity or *grām devtā*, Kāṇḍar, who is the ultimate source of authority in the district. He is consulted on matters great and small, from festivals, weddings, and funerals, to the weather, markets, and farming.

A party of villagers alights from a white jeep. At the center of the group are two men: a middle-aged man in white dhoti and pink shirt, and an older man who bears on his head a hefty bundle wrapped in crimson fabric. The first is a professional narrator, and inside the bundle carried by the second man is the main source of the narratives, the great classical Sanskrit text, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.

The palanquin surges forward to greet the new arrivals, and bows so deeply that its silver crown nearly touches the ground. To further blasts from the horn, accompanied by the drums, the deity leads the narrator and the bulky text into a newly erected marquee, where the week-long narration will be held.

The next seven days see the rich interplay of the two loci of authority: on the one hand, the local village deity, typical of these communities in the Garhwal Himalayas, and on the other, the text of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, focus of a recently introduced cultural practice that evolved in the district of Vraj on the North Indian Plain. This article will explore the role of local, indigenous power, as represented by the village deity and the sacred text of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.¹

In the following paragraphs I will describe briefly the geographical setting of Naluna and the local community. Having sketched out the theoretical framework for this study, I will then describe the week-long festival, with particular emphasis on the interaction of the village deity and the sacred text, both of which serve as ciphers of metonymies for the local authority and the authority of the recently imported practice of *purāṇic* storytelling. In the conclusion, I will summarize the role of the two entities and show how they can best be understood in terms of a discourse of hospitality performed by empowered, subjective agents.



FIGURE I. Naluna looking south along the course of the Gaṅgā, Uttarakhand. Naluna is the establishment on the right.

NALUNA: THE SETTING OF THE WEEK-LONG FESTIVAL

The hamlet of Naluna in the Garhwal foothills is located on the banks of the Gaṅgā River, less than 80 km from its source in the high Himalayas, and about 100 km upstream from Haridwar where the river emerges on to the North Indian Plain. Steep, dry mountains tower over the river. Sometimes bare and rocky, sometimes forested, they are dotted with villages and terraced fields. A single road snakes along the valley floor beside the river. Naluna is a private estate of half a dozen one- and two-storey buildings on two acres of land that slopes down between the road and the river. An iron gate at the bottom of the garden opens directly on to the riverbed (FIGURE I).

Three villages, Saiñj, Syābā, and Kumāltī, lie within one or two hours' walk uphill from Naluna. Each is home to three to four hundred people, mainly subsistence farming families, growing their own wheat, dhal, sesame, and potatoes. Most families keep dairy cattle and buffalo. Other than agriculture and salaries from a water-bottling plant, there are few economic opportunities. Many local people find work on the plains and remit money to support their families.

Society and culture in the mountains of Garhwal differ in several important respects from those of the plains below. The detailed studies of Garhwali society, culture, and institutions by Berreman, Sax, and Alter are generally applicable to the district around Naluna (BERREMAN 1962, 1964, 1972; SAX 1990, 1991, 2002,

2009; ALTER 2008). Most villages in the area are dominated numerically by people who identify themselves as Rajputs, and who account for 80–90 percent of the local population. Brahmins, who hold a monopoly on Sanskritic ritual in the community, but may also do some farming, account for about 5 percent. Members of an outcaste community, who refer to themselves as Harijan, also account for about 5 percent. One of the Harijans' traditional occupations is to serve as musicians for the village deity.

The local language is Garhwali, which is closely related to Hindi, but as Hindi is also the language of education, governance, and interaction with the outside world, it is making considerable inroads locally. Villagers speak Hindi with outsiders and sometimes even among themselves. With the exception of the school teachers and one or two high-school students, few people speak English.

The people around Naluna are Hindus, and their practices are centered on Śiva, and on the Bhakti traditions of both Kṛṣṇa and Rāma. There is also much evidence of worship of the serpent deity, Nāg Rājā. One unique feature is the prominence of the Pāṇḍava brothers as expressed in the *Pāṇḍav Lilā* (SAX 2002). For our purposes, the most important distinctive aspect of the Garhwali religious practice is the role of the village deity (*grām devtā*), whom I will describe below.

For most of the year the road past Naluna is used only by local vehicles. Between May and October, however, a huge volume of traffic makes its way to Gangotri, a major pilgrimage site near the source of the Gaṅgā. Improvements to the road and increasing numbers of affluent, urban middle-class pilgrims are bringing great changes to the valley. New guesthouses, camping grounds, shops, and ashrams appear every year.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING THE HILLS/PLAINS DICHOTOMY

The relationship between communities in the hills and those on the plains and their respective cultural practices have often been understood and represented as one of uneven asymmetrical power relations, with a tendency to pitch one against the other, as if either can be said to constitute a homogenous and fixed entity. This relationship has traditionally been seen as a dichotomy, often colored by antagonism. This view has gradually been tempered and has become more nuanced over time, as communities are seen as fluid, adaptive agents of change, rather than as passive disempowered victims, or recipients. Some of the attempts at understanding these complex relationships are explored below.

One of the earliest and highly influential attempts was in terms of the great (“classical”) and little (“folk”) traditions (REDFIELD 1956; MARRIOTT 1955; SINGER 1972). Under this paradigm, the practices surrounding the reading of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* might be understood in terms of the “great” tradition associated with Sanskritic literacy and with the major pan-India pilgrimage centers of the North Indian Plain. On the other hand, Kaṇḍār, the local deity, might be described in terms of the “little traditions” of village folkways. Yet there have been many

critics of this approach, in particular because the terms are imprecise, and local communities (such as those centered on Naluna) make little or no distinction between the two supposed traditions (DUMONT and POCOCK 1957; TAMBIAH 1970).

Drawing on the dichotomy of the great and little traditions, Fuller speaks of Viṣṇu and Śiva as the “two great gods” of the Hindu tradition (FULLER 1992, 32), as opposed to the “village gods and other little deities” (FULLER 1992, 48). Nevertheless he offers a valid critique of this approach in that he recognizes that the “little deities” are “still vitally important, powerful presences for millions of ordinary Hindus” (FULLER 1992, 48), as was certainly the case with Kaṇḍār at Naluna.

A second approach to understanding the relationship between peoples of the hills and plains may adopt the framework of “Sanskritization.” This approach, originally articulated by M. N. Srinivas, is the process by which members of “low” castes appropriate cultural practices and beliefs usually associated with “high” castes as a means of improving their own social status. Such practices might include abstaining (publicly) from drinking alcohol and eating meat, and adopting religious practices and concepts usually associated with the province of Brahminical, Sanskritic (as opposed to vernacular) traditions (SRINIVAS 1952; JONES 1976). Accordingly, one might also see the practice of recounting narratives from the *Bhāgavatapurāna* in the Garhwal community as a form of Sanskritization. Yet, as I argue below, the *saptāh* at Naluna was more than the mere emulation of a putative Sanskritic tradition, but was part of a much more dynamic, active, synthetic process.

In his ethnography of Brahmins in Banaras, Parry noted that his informants posited a sharp distinction between the *śāstrik* (that is, *śāstrik* or scriptural) which entail practices and beliefs that derive their ultimate authority from Sanskritic texts, and the *laukik* (literarily worldly or popular) which are more ephemeral, local usages. And yet the Benares Brahmins recognized that belief and practice were visualized as a composite of both (PARRY 1985, 205). Fuller also recognizes what he terms “a more diffuse Sanskritic versus non-Sanskritic tradition” (FULLER 1988, 245). This is a useful perspective for the present study as it acknowledges the different origins of twin sources of authority under consideration, but accepts that they come together and exert power in a single, shared field of action.

Recent scholarship has attempted to view hill communities not in terms of “dominant” plains traditions, but from the perspective of the upland communities themselves. Citing Lewis and Wigen, van Schendel calls for a more nuanced approach to imagining areas, not as “trait geographies,” but as “process geographies,” characterized not by spatial contiguity, but patterned by “lattices, archipelagos, hollow rings, patchworks” (VAN SCHENDEL 2002, 664). In a novel approach to imagining the dichotomy of hills and plains, van Schendel posits a cultural region for which he coined the name “Zomia.” This encompasses the vast non-contiguous highland areas that straddle the borders of Central, South, East, and Southeast Asia. Zomia stands in juxtaposition to the valley-dominated societies, with which it generally has antagonistic relationships. Several characteristics are shared by Zomia:

They include language affinities (for example, Tibeto-Burman languages), religious commonalities (for example, community religions and, among the universalistic religions, Buddhism and Christianity), cultural traits (for example, kinship systems, ethnic scatter zones), ancient trade networks, and ecological conditions (for example, mountain agriculture). (VAN SCHENDEL 2002, 653–54)

One of the many scholars to have explored the “Zomia approach” to the hills and plains bifurcation is James C. SCOTT (2009). He argues against the commonly-held view that hill communities are a derivative of their low-land counterparts. That is, rather than being the primitive ancestors of plains communities, or the “vernacular” version of an authentic tradition, these people are in fact refugees from the plains:

[H]ill peoples are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppression of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics and warfare. (SCOTT 2009, ix)

METAPHOR OF HOSPITALITY

This article seeks to address these issues by extending this modality of interaction and cross-fertilization between these seeming dichotomies (village deity/sacred text; hills/plains; great/little traditions), drawing on the metaphor of hospitality and the interplay of hosts and guests. Rather than decrying the community of Naluna as an adulterated version of the plains, or attentively romanticizing it (as some accuse Scott of doing) as an empowered, self-sufficient, and perhaps homogenous entity, my concern here is to chart a more nuanced and dynamic picture of this interaction: an approach which is sensitive to ideas about hospitality, which I will outline below.

Atithi devo bhava! “The guest should be a god!”—this famous dictum of the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* has reverberated for the past two-and-a-half millennia as the gold standard for hospitality in South Asia. While *satkriya*, the hospitable reception of guests, has lain at the heart of Indic cultural theory, its social practice has always been subject to the normative influences of commensality, gender, caste, and class prerogatives. Countless examples of host-guest interactions are scattered throughout anthropological and ethnographic literature, but I know of no systematic attempt to theorize hospitality in a specifically South Asian context. Western theorization of hospitality goes back as least as far as Diderot and Kant, but for our purposes, Derrida’s contemporary approach to hospitality provides a productive hermeneutic framework. McKinnon notes that “In theorizing hospitality, Derrida uses the polysemic meaning of the word *hôte* to work through and consider the significance of the aporia between political hospitality and ethical hospitality” (MCKINNON 2010, 133–34). For Derrida, political hospitality is understood as “a question of law, an obligation, a duty, and a right” (YEGENOGLU 2003, 15).

In contrast, the ethically hospitable home is open to the radically other guest.... Through this exchange, however, the host is invited home by the radically other guest her/himself. Ethical hospitality requires that the host opens up her/his home without invitation or common language, knowing nothing of the guest, and without the expectation of reciprocity. This relationship is truly hospitable because both host and guest are *host* to one another by endowing each other with the gift of surviving life without necessitating reciprocity of exchange. Ethical hospitality disrupts notions of ownership and property, for the home is no longer owned in a singular sense. (MCKINNON 2010, 134)

Significantly for this investigation, Derrida conducts his analysis of hospitality in terms of power and avoids the pitfalls of romanticizing the relationship between host and guest. The host has the power not only over her/his domicile, but over the guests who enter it. "As Derrida makes explicit... the notion of hospitality requires one to be the 'master' of the house, country, or nation (and hence controlling). His point is relatively simple here; to be hospitable, it is first necessary that one must have the power to host" (REYNOLDS 2010).

THE SAPTĀH

A seven-day cycle of storytelling focusing on the deity Kṛṣṇa was held at Naluna in November 2009. These narratives are found in their most authoritative form in the Sanskrit text known as the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. This well-known text is generally thought to have reached its current form by about 1000 CE. It treats the various avatars of the deity Viṣṇu, and in particular his form as Kṛṣṇa. The tenth book contains the best-loved stories of Kṛṣṇa's childhood and youth among the cowherding people of Vraj. Synopses of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* are given by ROCHER (1986) and BRYANT (2004, 2007). The Gita Press edition contains an accurate version of the complete Sanskrit text with a serviceable but quaint English translation (GOSWAMI 2005). On the youthful pastimes of Kṛṣṇa see SCHWEIG (2007).

According to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*'s own meta-narrative, the text was first enunciated in the course of seven days by the sage Śuka to the king Parīkṣit, who was waiting to die as the result of a curse. Having heard the divine narrative, the king attained liberation (*mokṣa*) from cyclical existence at the moment of his death, the supreme attainment in most Hindu traditions. Accordingly, a seven-day recitation of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is said to confer great spiritual benefits on both the sponsor of the event and on the audience. The correct Sanskrit term for such an event is *Bhāgavata-saptāha*, but the shorthand Hindi name of *saptāh* is often used. The practice of *saptāh* is an ancient one. A comprehensive set of instructions, which probably dates from around 1000 CE, is contained in the *Padmapurāṇa*, and is reprinted in many contemporary editions of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.

There is a lively contemporary practice of *saptāh* performance in and around the cities of Mathura and Vrindavan, in the district of Vraj, Uttarpradesh, by tradition the site of Kṛṣṇa's birth and childhood, and the primary focus for Kṛṣṇa devotion

and pilgrimage. In spite of its obvious significance as a contemporary religious practice, little or nothing about the *saptāh* has appeared in scholarly literature (TAYLOR 2010, 2012, forthcoming).

The contemporary *saptāh* may be a lavish affair, costing tens of thousands or even millions of dollars. It may be sponsored by an individual, a family, or a religious trust. *Saptāhs* are held in private houses, ashrams, or in vast marquees, and may attract hundreds, thousands, or in some cases, tens of thousands of attendees. The chief exponent or storyteller (known as the *śāstrī*, *vaktā*, or *vyās*), accompanied by up to a dozen musicians, sits on a throne on a decorated stage. He relates stories from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* to the audience in Hindi, interspersed with the occasional Sanskrit verses. The narration may be embellished with everyday sermonizing, and sectarian or other local content. Audiences participate in the singing of *bhājans*, call-and-response exclamations, and dancing. Some exponents create an intense, ecstatic atmosphere (TAYLOR forthcoming).

As a contemporary institution, the large-scale *saptāh* seems to be expanding, partly because recent economic reforms have created a class of newly affluent sponsors (NANDA 2009). The growing demand for exponents is fed by at least one “university” in Vrindavan, the Śrīmad-Bhāgavata-viśvavidyālaya, which offers a five-year training course for those who wish to make a career as a professional *saptāh* narrator.

The practice of *saptāh* is probably a relatively recent innovation in the Garhwal region. Recitations of the *Śivapurāṇa*, *Devībhāgavata*, and the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, lasting seven, nine, or eleven days, have been held in the Kedarnath valley (northern Rudraprayag district). Many Brahmins in this area take their training either from local institutions or from Benares.² Local informants stated that the first *Bhāgavatapurāṇa saptāh* was held at Saiñj “about fifty years ago,” but I have been unable to find any further information on this subject. In addition to the *Pāṇḍav Līlā* mentioned above, the practice of staging *Rāmlīlā* also seems to be quite widespread.

There were two primary loci of power, sources of authority, objects of reverence, and focal points of ritual action at the *saptāh* at Naluna: the *devtā* or village deity and the Sanskrit text of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. Power is undoubtedly more diffuse, subtle, and capillary (to use a Foucauldian term), and indeed more contested than I am allowing here. Nevertheless, by simplifying this investigation to these two poles of power, we acquire a practical hermeneutic framework. In the following section I will describe the two loci, before turning to their interaction over the seven days.

THE SAIÑJ *DEVTA*

The village of Saiñj is situated an hour’s walk uphill from Naluna. Like many other villages in Garhwal and elsewhere in India, it has a village spirit or deity. His name is Kaṇḍār, but he is more commonly referred to as the *devtā*. The *devtā* has a shrine in the village, but he communicates by inducing movement in a palanquin or *ḍolī* (FIGURE 2). The *ḍolī* is derived from the simple bridal palan-



FIGURE 2. The deity's palanquin or *ḍolī* is carried on the shoulders of two village men.

quin (a wooden chair carried between two long poles) which is used for carrying women to their weddings in the Garhwal area. The *devtā's* *ḍolī* consists of a hollow wooden frame in the shape of a cube about 500mm on each side. The structure, tightly wrapped in red cloth, is borne on two poles about 4m long on the shoulders of two men from the village. Carrying the *ḍolī* is an important task, and only six men in the village are “qualified” to do so. It is said that they do not consciously move the *ḍolī*, but merely respond to the movements induced by the deity.

The *ḍolī* itself is empty: it contains no image or icon, but the *devtā* gives it *prāṇ* (“life” or “breath”). Anyone may ask the *devtā* questions, either verbally or “mentally.” The *devtā* responds to questions by causing the *ḍolī* to rock from side to side and bounce up and down on the shoulders of two men. Sometimes, the *ḍolī* may bend over and touch parts of a person's body with its spike—commonly their outstretched hand, forehead, chin, or chest.³ The *ḍolī* may also plunge sideways so that its spike touches the ground, and may lurch unpredictably backwards, forwards, or even sideways into the crowd. It is usually accompanied by one or two large silver drums (*ḍhol*), and an s-shaped bugle (*raṅsiṅghā*) about 1.2m long (ALTER 2008).

The *devtā* is consulted on a wide range of issues: from the day-to-day minutiae of farming and trading, to major life events such as marriages and funerals. Individuals may interpret the *devtā's* responses themselves, or they may use an intermediary, usually a senior man. For this service the questioner may offer the intermediary a small sum, usually Rs 10. Women, who ask “unimportant” questions, “usually about their cows or their health,” are generally left to interpret the responses of the deity themselves.

The *devtā* is treated with great respect and is regarded as the most powerful deity in the district. Petitioners honor the *ḍolī* with folded hands when addressing it, and reach out to touch it as it passes. It is also feared. At the time of the *saptāb*, a man was dying in Saiñj. It was believed that the *devtā* was causing his death because the individual had wronged him over a certain matter. As will be discussed below, it was believed that the *devtā* physically pushed a man to the ground during a “dispute.”

It is unclear from the literature how widespread the institution of the *devtā*'s *ḍolī* is, but it appears to be a fairly generic Garhwali phenomenon. For example, the *ḍolīs* of Garhwali deities from Tehri, Pauri, Srinagar, and Chamoli come to Kedarnath on *devtā-yātra*.⁴ I observed six other *ḍolīs* between Uttarkashi and Bhaṭvaḍī which were similar to the one from Saiñj. A *ḍolī* from the Simla district (140 km to the west) closely resembles the Saiñj *ḍolī*.⁵ *Devtās* in upper Garhwal and Kumaon are said to ride in a “bridal palanquin” (SAX 1990, 491). Surprisingly, I can find no mention of them in ALTER (2008).

The *devtā* represents an important source of authority in the village. As one informant said, “whatever happens in the area of Saiñj, they have to consult the *ḍolī*.” It is, however, possible to argue, negotiate, and reason with the *devtā*. At times the *devtā* seemed cantankerous and picky, but having observed him at close quarters for nearly two weeks, it seemed that he provided a means by which the leading men in the village reached a consensus among themselves. The *devtā* became an embodiment and an expression of the collective village will, subject of course to preexisting power relations of class, caste, and gender. The *devtā* was also a force for social cohesion and control. “Without the *devtā*,” one informant said, “it would be chaos. He is like a policeman.”

At one point I asked the sponsor of the *saptāb* whether the *devtā* made the decisions or if it was the people who decided. He first answered, “The *devtā* and the people are the same,” but then after a moment's reflection, he gave a second answer: “The people decide and the *devtā* gives a stamp of authority.”

THE TEXT OF THE *BHĀGAVATAPURĀṆA*

If the *devtā* was one pole of local authority, then the Sanskrit text of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* as a physical artifact was the other significant locus of power. The text used by the exponent at Naluna was a hefty volume in the traditional format, measuring 500 mm in length, 200 mm in width, and 100 mm in height.

The text was central to the *saptāb* in two important ways. First, it was the ultimate source of the narratives and was the *raison d'être* for the event. As will be described below, the exponent read sections of the text to himself each morning, and completed the entire volume in the course of the seven days. For most of the event, however, the text sat wrapped in red velour on an altar in front of the exponent's throne.

Here it fulfilled its second important function as the focal point of much ritual action. On the altar, it occupied a central position amid an assemblage of significant objects of ritual attention and veneration: the exponent himself, a conse-

crated pitcher, a sacred basil plant, and an image of Kṛṣṇa as Jagathnāth Purī. Most attendees performed a range of ritual actions in front of the throne upon arriving or leaving the event.

The text is also empowered by its own discourse. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* frequently states that worship offered to the text is the same as worship offered to God (*Bhagavān*) himself, and that the text is God in physical form. This was also reiterated by the exponent on many occasions. The text was treated with great reverence at all times, and was borne on the head whenever it was moved from one place to another.⁶

Having identified these two loci of authority—the *devtā* representing local authority, and the text representing the external authority—I will now describe the *saptāh* with particular attention to these two entities.⁷ In the concluding section we will then compare their roles and describe the ways in which they interacted and contributed to the event.

THE SAPTĀH AT NALUNA

The principal sponsor, originally from Uttarpradesh, divides his time between Naluna and a second home in Australia. He has owned the property at Naluna for about twenty years and is admired and respected in the district as an important benefactor and employer. Planning for the *saptāh* began in April 2009 when the sponsor first approached the *devtā* to ask for his permission to hold the event. Within a week it was announced that the *devtā* had agreed and that the dates would be 19–25 November. The *devtā* was next consulted on the site of the pavilion for the ceremonial fire, known as the *yajñasālā*. A site was chosen in the lower part of the garden at Naluna, but the *devtā* had decreed that no trees were to be cut down. An old plum tree grew in the middle of the chosen location, but a compromise was reached, and the tree was transplanted to a safe place elsewhere in the garden. The pavilion, which was completed by early November, was an open structure about six meters square with a thatched roof and a deep pit for the fire in the center. The *devtā* had said through a medium, *triya triya triya* (“women, women, women”), which was interpreted to mean that women were not permitted to enter the pavilion or circumambulatory path around it.

The other important structure was the marquee in which the *kathā* or storytelling sessions would be held. The marquee was erected on the concrete drive and parking area at the top of the garden. Six simple chandeliers were suspended from the roof, and green synthetic carpet was rolled out. A colorful backdrop was hung around the perimeter as a makeshift wall. At the front of the marquee on a low stage was the exponent’s throne, and to the left was a space for the musicians and honored guests.

Streams of people bustled in and out during the week leading up to the *saptāh*, bringing ritual supplies, food, and a lot of firewood. Schoolgirls made garlands of marigolds, while teams of helpers made bunting. Flags, flowers, and lights were strung up along the eaves of the main buildings.

THE SAIÑJ *DEVTA* ARRIVES

The atmosphere of anticipation intensified with the impending arrival of the Saiñj *devtā* on the evening of 16 November. Unlike other *devtās* which may travel by jeep, the Saiñj *devtā* is always carried on foot. A house-call from the *devtā* is a great honor: this, his first visit to Naluna, and the fact that he would be staying for nine days added to its significance. His approach was indicated by the throbbing of the drums and the wild shriek of his bugle approaching in the darkness. There was a commotion at the front gate as the musicians and then the *devtā* burst into the light. The sponsor, his staff and guests, and the head Brahmin in charge of the fire ceremony greeted him with a tray of offerings, garlands, and incense. The blare of a conch shell and the clang of the housebell added to the welcome. The head Brahmin sprinkled water on the ground and the *devtā* bowed to receive a garland. The *devtā* then suddenly plunged off into the darkness down the hill towards the pavilion.

On the lower side of the pavilion, a consultation was in progress. The head Brahmin and other leading Brahmins asked most of the questions, but everyone was talking animatedly. The *devtā* rocked back and forth, while occasionally making deep bows to the ground. The men interpreted these movements and asked further questions. At one point during the consultation, the elderly head Brahmin fell to the ground. At the end of the session, the *devtā* made his way to a room where he was to spend the night. Later that evening the sponsor told me what had transpired:

1. The *devtā* had indicated that there were cracks in the cow dung plaster on the floor of the pavilion which had to be patched.
2. The *devtā* had selected a site for the flagpole for Hanuman's banner, which would indicate the presence of that deity during the *saptāh*.
3. The *devtā* had wanted to "sleep" in the pavilion, but the Brahmins had advised against this as it was not yet ready. They persuaded the *devtā* to spend one night in another room on the understanding that he could sleep in the pavilion as soon as it was finished.
4. The Brahmins also said that the *devtā* should leave Naluna to attend a wedding in the neighborhood the following day, Tuesday 17 November. The *devtā* had refused to attend because he never traveled on Tuesdays and the date of the wedding had been fixed without consulting him. The Brahmins tried to insist, but at this point the *devtā* "pushed" the head Brahmin to the ground.⁸ A compromise was reached: the *devtā* would go to the wedding for the day on Wednesday.
5. A second exponent in the district (incidentally, the head Brahmin's brother) was reportedly "very unhappy" because he had not been selected to conduct the *kathā* and had requested that the *devtā* intervene on his behalf. The *devtā* declined to do so.
6. A large rock had been unearthed in the garden when the septic system was being installed some time previously. The *devtā* required that the rock be removed.



FIGURE 3. The exponent Badrī Prasād (center) arrives at Naluna with a senior community member carrying the text of the *Bhāgavatapurāna* on his head.

THE *SAPTĀH* COMMENCES

At 11:30 a.m. on 19 November, the day the *saptāh* was to begin, there was a sudden burst of activity. The *devtā*'s drums started up and word reached us that the exponent was about to arrive. People streamed towards the front gate as a white jeep pulled up outside. An older gentleman alighted and stood by the side of the road with a thick red oblong bundle on his head—the text of the *Bhāgavatapurāna*. Surrounded by the drums and horns, the exponent appeared, dressed in a white jumper, salmon-colored *kurta*, and cream-colored *dhoti* (FIGURE 3).

The *devtā* bowed long and deeply to the text of the *Bhāgavatapurāna*, and touched the bundle with his spike. He held this deep bow for forty-five seconds. He seemed very “excited” and rocked rapidly from side to side. The exponent was also greeted, honored, and garlanded. The *devtā* then led the text and the exponent's party into the marquee, and was then set down on the stage next to the throne. The text, still wrapped in scarlet velour, was placed on a low table in the marquee and was honored with a small basket of offerings, garlands of marigolds, and ten-rupee notes.

TWO PRELIMINARY RITUALS

Over the next four hours, two important rituals were completed in the marquee: the *Kalāśasthāpana* (“Setting up the pitchers”) and the *Samkalpa*

(“Statement of intent”). The *devtā* led a procession of nine young girls down to the Gaṅgā with an entourage of thirty or forty onlookers. Each girl filled a small brass pitcher with water and carried it back on her head to the marquee in a procession led by the *devtā*.

Halfway up the drive, the *devtā* suddenly charged backwards down the path again. One of the Brahmins, visibly upset, ran up to the *devtā* and demanded, “*Kyā hua*—what happened?” After a brief consultation, it was revealed that the *devtā* objected to the fact that some people standing along the drive (myself included) were wearing shoes. Once we had taken off our shoes, the *devtā* resumed his procession up the drive. He bowed deeply to his musicians and to the throne and was set down on a low table in the marquee, next to the table bearing the text.

The ceremony resumed after lunch at 2:15 p.m. Seated in a ring on the floor of the marquee at the foot of the *devtā* and the text were the head Brahmin, who was to officiate, the exponent, the sponsor and his family, and two or three other Brahmins who helped conduct the ritual. The drummers and bearers of the *devtā* sat some distance away. The drum kept up a tattoo, reminiscent of an irregular heartbeat.

In a long and complex ritual, deities, especially Gaṇeśa, were invoked and propitiated. The pitchers were transformed into auspicious miniature universes, into which deities were invited. The second ritual flowed seamlessly from the first. The sponsor and his elderly father were invested with the sacred string and protective red threads. The sponsor also took a vow (*saṃkalpa*) to successfully complete all seven days of the *saptāh*. A complete set of clothes was given to each of the twelve Brahmins.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, a grand procession advanced from the marquee to the pavilion, led by the *devtā*'s drummers, two or three Brahmins, the sponsor's father carrying the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* on his head, the exponent, the *devtā*, and the sponsor and his family and guests carrying the nine pitchers, all accompanied by blasts on the conch, the ringing of bells, and devotional music broadcast over the PA. The whole procession then circumambulated the pavilion. Meanwhile the head Brahmin directed the placement of the pitchers in each of the four corners of the pavilion, at the corners of the fire pit, and on the mandala that had been made earlier in the day.

THE FIRST *KATHĀ* SESSION

By 4:30 p.m., the first *kathā* session finally began. The exponent took his place on the throne. The text of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, still wrapped in red, now lay in front of him on a raised altar. In front of that was a second, lower altar on which stood a pitcher and an image of Kṛṣṇa Jagannātha Purī (FIGURE 4). Three young Brahmin musicians sat to the left of the throne. The *devtā* rested on a low bench on the right of the stage. As the musicians sang songs of praise of Kṛṣṇa, the exponent unwrapped the text and rapidly cast his eyes over the first few pages. A small audience sat on the floor of the marquee.

At the conclusion of the *kīrtan*, the *devtā* was brought before the throne and made a series of deep bows while the exponent continued with his silent read-



FIGURE 4. The exponent seated on his throne during a *kathā* session. The text of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is immediately in front of him under the garlands of marigolds. A ritual pitcher and sacred image of Kṛṣṇa sit on a colored-rice mandala amid offerings in the foreground.

ing. All the while the wild drumming which accompanied the *devtā* mingled with the Vedic chanting of the head Brahmin. The sponsor's family honored the *devtā* which then bowed many times, first to his drummer, and then to the throne. After a further brief consultation with some petitioners, the *devtā* left the marquee in the direction of the pavilion.

At 5:00 p.m. the exponent had completed his silent reading, and began a slow song of praise in Sanskrit to the accompaniment of the flute and the harmonium. His first spoken words were "Victory to Viṣṇu! Victory to the Glorious Great *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*! Victory to the glorious deity, Kaṇḍār!" He then spoke of the power and significance of listening to the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, or "stories about God," as he called them.

The exponent spoke in Garhwali-accented Hindi, adding the occasional verse in Sanskrit. The pattern of his discourse, with a flute or harmonium improvising softly in the background, the general pitch, the rise and fall of his intonation, and even his mannerisms were all strongly reminiscent of other *saptāḥs* in and around Vrindavan (TAYLOR forthcoming).⁹

THE YAJÑA

Now that the pavilion had been completed and consecrated, and the pitcher had been installed, rituals would be conducted there every morning. These

began well before dawn and finished just before midday. During the morning, the head Brahmin, assisted at most times by eight to ten others, and accompanied by various members of the sponsor's family, would be seated on the floor of the pavilion, facing the sacred fire in the central pit. Sacred substances were added to the fire while Sanskrit mantras were intoned. The *yajña* was conducted for the benefit of the sponsor's forebears and deceased relatives. It also "purifies the atmosphere," as one local informant put it. It was always conducted in the presence of the *devtā* who was either squeezed into one side of the pavilion, or was seated on a low table outside. While the *yajña* was in progress, the exponent was seated on his throne in the marquee reading the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* silently to himself. Beginning long before dawn each morning, and usually finishing by about 11 a.m., he was aiming to read the entire text during the course of the week at the rate of one or two *skandhas* (books) each day.

THE SECOND *DEVTĀ* ARRIVES

On the second day of the *saptāh*, a burst of drumming and bugle-calls heralded the arrival of the *devtā* from the village of Kumālītī. The two almost identical *ḍolīs* met in the marquee, where the Kumālītī *devtā* bowed long and deep to the throne. The two *devtās* then bowed deeply and circled one another with "heads" down, their identical silver spikes almost touching. The Kumālītī *devtā* then gently touched the Saiñj *devtā* on his crown and on his poles with his spike. Saiñj then responded by tapping Kumālītī on his poles. Both rocked from side to side "excitedly." Kumālītī bowed long and low to the drummers, before plunging off down the hill towards the pavilion, where a long series of public consultations was held.

Kumālītī is a village several kilometers upstream from Naluna, on the other side of the river. In the past, the Saiñj *devtā* had serviced both communities, but about twenty-five years ago, the people of Kumālītī constructed their own *ḍolī*, and the Saiñj *devtā* gave it *prān*, "so that it could move." As a result, they are considered "brother *devtās*" (*bhai devtā*). The Kumālītī *devtā*, unlike Saiñj, is not able to speak through a medium, but communicates through movements alone. He has his own drums and bugle, but there is at present no one to play them, possibly because there are no longer any suitable persons from Harijan families in his village.

THE SUBSEQUENT *KATHĀ* SESSIONS

The exponent appeared for the second *kathā* session at 1:40 p.m., bowed to the throne, and saluted the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. He began with tributes, sung in Sanskrit, to Vyāsa and Gaṇeśa, and followed with a round of "victory" calls and *kīrtans* in Hindi. Villagers arrived in twos or threes, or sometimes in larger groups. Most arrivals made an offering at the altar: a bag of wheat, a flower, a piece of fruit, or a ten-rupee note. Many performed a "circumambulation" in front of the altar by turning around 360 degrees on the spot with their hands held in an *añjali*.

Over the next three hours, the exponent narrated a number of well-known stories from *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*: the birth of Śuka, and how he was tested by Janaka;

Nārada's past life as the son of a serving girl; and the massacre of the Pāṇḍavas' sons. Audience participation in the form of clapping and singing along became more enthusiastic and spontaneous as the crowd grew. The villagers sat for hour after hour in rapt attention. By 4 p.m., we had reached the last round of "victory" calls. The *devtā*'s drums and horn led the sponsor and his family to the throne where they and members of the audience performed *ārtī*. Everyone threw petals in the direction of the throne and performed a "circumambulation." Each attendee received *prasād* and a spoonful of sweetened milk "nectar." The cheerful, chatting villagers drifted towards the gate where plates of semolina halva were distributed.

The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth days of the *saptāh* were all conducted in a similar manner to the second day described above. Every morning the fire ceremony continued in the pavilion with the *devtā* in attendance, and the *kathā* took place during the afternoon in the marquee with the text of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* as the centerpiece. Listening to the *kathā* each afternoon, one was always conscious of the *devtā*'s presence down the hill in the pavilion. Hearing his drumbeat in the distance seemed to indicate that he was "awake," and was subtly presiding over the *saptāh*.

During these four days, the exponent progressed through the stories of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, sometimes lingering in great detail over a single episode, at others, skipping over vast stretches of narrative terrain in a sentence or two. All the while he maintained the oratorical "Vrindavan" style described above. Each session was conducted in Hindi and included only three or four verses of Sanskrit from the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, and also from the *Bhagavadgītā* and other popular texts like *Rāmcaritmānas*.

The exponent, Śrī Badrī Prasād Nautiyāl Jī, was a local boy made good. Born to a Brahmin family in Saiñj, his father had sent him to the Śrīmad-bhāgavata-*viśvavidyālaya*, the institution in Vrindavan which specializes in *purāṇic* readings, because he "wanted the Sanskrit tradition to continue." He began his studies in 1994 and graduated with the degree of exponent five years later. This was the seventh *saptāh* that he had conducted since graduating.

THE FINAL DAY OF THE SAPTĀH

By 10:20 a.m. on the final day, the exponent had begun his opening Sanskrit chants, while the *devtā*'s drums were "talking" in the background. Between the *kīrtans* and the "victory" cries, the sponsor ascended the throne and placed a gold ring on the exponent's finger as part of his final fee. As villagers drifted in, made offerings to the throne, and took their seats, the exponent related the stories of Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs*, Kaṁsa's attempts to kill him, the devotee Sudāmā, Kṛṣṇa's flight to Dvārakā, and his marriage with Rukmiṇī. The session concluded at 1:20 p.m. when the two *devtās* arrived for *ārtī*, *kīrtans*, and Sanskrit chants. Both *devtās* were now rocking "excitedly" in front of the throne. The air was thick with drums, horns, bells, and incense, and a large crowd had gathered. One young woman fell into a trance, writhed across the floor, and waved the *ārtī* tray wildly, before falling back anonymously into the crowd. Shortly afterwards, *prasād* was

distributed and both *devtās* returned to the pavilion. The singing came to an end, the crowd “circumambulated,” half-prostrated to the throne, and dispersed.

At 1:30 p.m., the two *devtās* circumambulated the pavilion and led a procession of everyone on site, perhaps seventy people in all, down to the Gaṅgā. While the exponent sat in contemplation on a rock by the river, bells and conches rang out, and the ever-present drums and bugle were sounded. Both *devtās* touched the water with their spikes, while the head Brahmin conducted a brief *pūjā* at the water’s edge.

The *devtās* then led the way back to the marquee where the head Brahmin conducted a further *pūjā* for the sponsor and his family, followed by a closing ceremony. At this point, another man was possessed, and hissing and panting, clambered over the audience and poured a handful of rice into the sponsor’s hand.

By 4 p.m., after a major communal feast of *prasād*, the sun was getting low, and many of the attendees had already set out for home. Both *devtās* were in the marquee and were preparing to leave, their “skirts” tucked up in their undercarriage for the trip home. The Kumālī *devtā* received a last round of honors and a new gold and red scarf from the sponsor and his wife. Devotees sat on the ground beneath both of the *devtās* to receive their blessings. At last, after a final bout of bobbing, bowing, and “affectionate” touching of spikes, the Saiñj *devtā* escorted his “younger brother” up the drive and out of the gate. The Kumālī *devtā* was lifted up on to the roof of a battered grey jeep and disappeared up the road.

As the sponsor presented the Brahmins with white envelopes containing their fees, the Saiñj *devtā* completed yet another round of consultations. One of the sponsor’s young retainers then took the red-bound copy of the *Bhāgavatapurāna* on his head and the *devtā* bowed to him. Finally the sponsor himself took the text on his head and, led by the drums and bugle, he and the *devtā* escorted the exponent up the drive to the main gate. The text, the exponent, his assistants, and their entire luggage were loaded into a second jeep which eventually headed off downhill.

Finally, at 4:50 p.m. the drums and bugle led the Saiñj *devtā* and his entourage up the drive one last time. They turned on to the road and headed for home. We watched the procession until the *devtā* disappeared around a bend. With both the *devtās* gone, it finally felt as if the *saptāh* was over.

In the days that followed, the sound system and the marquee were gradually dismantled, and the borrowed bedding and pots and pans were returned to their owners. The decorations came down and sacks of surplus supplies were given away. Naluna slowly returned to normal.

MODELING THE INTERACTION OF THE VILLAGE DEITY AND THE SACRED TEXT

In the following section, I will summarize the roles of the *devtā* and the text during the *saptāh*, paying particular attention to the specific instances during which the two entities interacted. First, the *devtā*’s role and his contributions to the event were as follows. He gave permission for the *saptāh* to be held and deter-

mined suitable dates; placed a ban on the cutting of trees; criticized construction of the pavilion floor; restricted access of women to the pavilion; determined the position of Hanuman's banner and oversaw its erection; required that a large rock be removed; led the initial procession to the Gaṅgā; welcomed the text and the exponent on their arrival; presided over the preliminary rituals; led the *Kalaśasthāpana* procession to the Gaṅgā; presided over the fire-ceremony in the pavilion; objected to the wearing of shoes; presided over the first *kathā*; was frequently honored by name in the *kathā* sessions; his drums and horn led the procession for *ārtī* at the conclusion of each day's *kathā*; welcomed the Kumālī *devtā*; presided over the final *kathā* session and the closing *pūjā*; led the final procession to the river; escorted the Kumālī *devtā* to the gate on departure; and finally escorted the text and the *śāstri* to the gate on departure.

In short, the *devtā* participated in, or presided over, all of the major aspects of the *saptāh*, from the earliest planning to its successful conclusion. The above list expresses the practical, concrete aspects of the *devtā*'s involvement in the event. His presence was also experienced in a more subtle way: the *saptāh* only truly seemed to begin when he arrived, and was only truly over when he had departed. His constant presence and oversight were suggested by the continual, irregular beating of his drum which permeated all the events at Naluna.

In so far as the *devtā* represents, creates, or crystallizes some form of community consensus, his control of the *saptāh* is a surrogate form of community control. The *devtā* is the means by which the community exerts its hegemony or authority over affairs in the district. The *devtā* "localized" the exotic practice of the *saptāh* at Naluna.

On the basis of the above description of the *saptāh*, we observed the following roles and functions of the text-as-artifact: it was carried on the head of the exponent's assistant on arrival; it was welcomed at the gate by the *devtā*; was honored while on a low table in the marquee; it was present during the preliminary rituals; performed circumambulation of the pavilion in front of the *devtā*; it was the ultimate source of the narratives and *raison d'être* for the *saptāh*; it was honored as "God in physical form" during the discourse; it was the focus of all ritual action at the throne; it was accompanied by the *devtā* to the gate on departure; and it was carried on the head of the sponsor on departure.

Among these, there were several points of direct interaction between the *devtā* and the text-as-artifact which warrant closer scrutiny. It will be recalled that when the text, accompanied by the exponent, first arrived at Naluna on the opening day of the *saptāh*, the *devtā* proceeded to the gate to welcome the arriving party with his drums and bugle. The *devtā* first bowed long and low to the text before they all advanced to the marquee together. During the two preliminary rituals, the *devtā* and the text were seated side by side as the *Kalaśasthāpana* and *Samkalpa* were conducted on the floor of the marquee in front of them. On this occasion, they could be envisaged as co-hosts or co-overseers of the rituals. In the procession during which the pitchers were carried to the pavilion, the text took precedence and was at the forefront of the procession, while the *devtā* followed immediately

behind. At the beginning of the first *kathā* session, the Saiñj *devtā* was present in the marquee and bowed deeply and repeatedly to the throne where the text was placed. On the final day of the *saptāh*, both *devtās* were present and both honored the throne. When the exponent departed, the *devtā* escorted the text, borne on the head of the sponsor, to the gate of Naluna.

It is true that great reverence and deference was expressed through the *devtā* for the text but how are we to understand the relationship between these two poles of authority?

Let us return briefly to the various models proposed for exploring a “plains/hills dichotomy” at the beginning of this paper. In earlier times, the rubrics of “great tradition” associated with Sanskritic literacy and the “little tradition” of village folkways might have been applied to the twin loci of power at Naluna, but this mode of analysis meets a number of major hurdles. First, the two sets of religious practices, reading the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and seeking guidance from the village deity, are not seen as dichotomous, opposed, or separate traditions by local practitioners. On the contrary, they are seen as different aspects of Hindu religious practice. As one informant put it, “It is all Hinduism.” Secondly, the very use of the dyad great/little seems anomalous, given the immediate, local power of life and death ascribed to the *devtā*. Surely if either were “great” in this context, it would be the deity, as he looms so large in the lives of the community.

Can the week-long reading of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* be understood as a process of Sanskritization? In the strictest sense, Sanskritization describes the adoption of practices usually associated with “high” castes by members of “low” castes as a means of accumulating social capital. These might include eating vegetarian food, avoiding alcohol, and adopting religious practices typical of “high” castes. Strictly by this definition the answer must be in the negative. The exponent was a Brahmin in any case, so he cannot be said to be adopting “high” caste practices. The chief sponsor was a Yadav, a comparatively “low” caste, but as a wealthy outsider and esteemed benefactor in the valley, he was largely outside the local caste system. While it is true that his social status and reputation in the valley were enhanced by the *saptāh*, it cannot be said that he adopted the “high” caste practice of the *saptāh* to achieve these ends. Indeed, it is by no means clear that the practice of sponsoring these type of events is the prerogative of “high” castes. My impression is that any individuals with sufficient wealth would find Brahmins willing to conduct a *saptāh* on their behalf. Can it be argued that the community as a whole in staging and participating a *saptāh* is seeking to Sanskritize itself? The *saptāh* represented a significant injection of money into the local economy. Many people, including Brahmins, musicians, and local businesses and laborers benefitted economically. The hundreds of faithful (and the merely curious) who attended, at most, accumulated religious capital, and at least, received a free plate of semolina halva. Again, it would be difficult to describe the *saptāh* in terms of Sanskritization.

This might be the time to pause and reflect for a moment on the role of the Brahmins in the local community, in the *saptāh* and in the process of cultural change in Garhwal. Locally, they are the only group authorized to carry out the

essentially Vedic rituals surrounding the fire sacrifice, and to act as exponents at a *saptāh*. For these and other ritual functions, members of this community train as far away as Benares and Vrindavan, but also study in local, regional institutions, and, as we saw at Naluna, young Brahmins are “apprenticed” to older practitioners, and seem to be “learning on the job.” With deep roots in the local area and strong links to important centers of ritual learning in the plains, the Brahmin community seems to be an important conduit of innovative religious and cultural practices in the district.

The third proposed model is one that juxtaposes the *śāstrīk* (literary, scriptural elements) against the *laukīk* (popular or vernacular practices), while recognizing that many religious practices incorporate elements of both. The *Bhāgavatapurāna* is undoubtedly part of the *śāstrīk* tradition, but I would argue that its role in the *saptāh* is decidedly *laukīk*. The actual Sanskrit verses of the text play a minor role in the performance, which is almost entirely delivered in the vernacular. Similarly the text-as-artifact’s ritual significance as an object of veneration is far removed from *śāstrīk* practice.

Scott’s argument and the “Zomia” approach provide another productive historical framework that illuminates and informs these interactions, and has been successfully applied, for example, to the Thangmi community of the Central Himalaya (SCHNEIDERMAN 2010). This casts an interesting light on Garhwal, where it is sometimes held that the dominant land-owning community, the Rajputs, fled from Rajasthan under pressure from the invading Mughals. However, the “Zomia model” remains predicated on an untenable dichotomy between hills and plains, with little recognition of the multiple cultural resources and strategies that inform the movement of goods, ideas, and populations between the two geographical zones.

Considering the *devtā*’s key role in the planning and day-to-day running of the *saptāh*, and the mode of interaction between the *devtā* and the text, their relationship can be best understood using a metaphor of hospitality as theorized by Derida, that is, as the relationship between an empowered host (the village deity) and his honored guest (the text). The village deity’s functions (planning, arranging, greeting, managing, honoring, farewellling) are all consistent with the functions of a responsible and conscientious host, and his provision of *satkriyā*, or hospitable treatment, as it widely understood in the Hindu context. Similarly, the text’s role of receiving honor and deference while accepting the arrangements made by his host are fully consistent with the role of an honored guest.

The *devtā*, as host, brought the event under local aegis, and enabled the adaptation and integration of the *kathā*—originally in this form the alien product of Sanskritic, Brahminical plains culture—into the cultural environment of the mountains, with the support and active participation of the community. The result was a synthesis of cultural forms witnessed daily throughout the event. This was most clearly suggested on those occasions when the *devtā* presided over *ārtī* in the marquee: his drums and bugle coalesced easily with the *paṇḍits*’ flute, harmonium, and *mṛdaṅga*, as aspects of mountain and plains cultures merged to form a single, novel, syncretic whole.

CONCLUSION

Forty years ago Berreman wrote of a perceived threat posed by plains-style Sanskritization to shamanistic mountain traditions (BERREMAN 1964, 61). What I perceived at the *saptāh* at Naluna was something quite different. Rather than seeing Garhwali people as passive recipients of change or victims of a process of cultural encroachment, they manifested as an empowered community engaging and assimilating novel cultural practices on their own terms and under their own agency. The metaphor of host and guest better describes the interaction of local and nonlocal cultural forms at the *saptāh* than do dichotomizing metaphors of the great and little tradition, Sanskritization, a *śāstrīk/laukīk* duality, invasion/imperialism, or Zomia-style refugees. The key to this successful, generative process of synthesis is empowerment. Members of the local community were sufficiently in control through the agency of the *devtā* to dictate the terms on which they engaged with the nonlocal. In other words, they were able to deal with cultural change on their own terms.

Earlier theoretical approaches to societies of the hills tend to be dominated by an urge to dichotomize, and to set up a false division between these communities and those on the plains. They ignore the free flow of population and ideas between the two and conceive of the hills communities as fixed, stable, passive, or vulnerable entities. This study is a step towards transcending these false dichotomies and is a move towards understanding communities in their own terms, endowed with their own sense of agency.

NOTES

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1. A thirty-five-minute documentary video of the *saptāh*, “Mountain God and Sacred Text,” is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCoUw_InhYg (accessed 1 September 2011).

2. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this information.

3. Although the *devtā* and the *ḍolī* are in fact separate entities—the *devtā* merely enlivens the *ḍolī*—the two terms were used interchangeably at Naluna, as if they were one and the same. I will follow the same practice here.

4. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this information.

5. See <http://shar.es/aIaaN> (accessed 1 September 2011).

6. An anecdote will further illustrate the great significance of the text as a sacred object. During the *kathā* sessions I followed the progress of the discourse by referring to a two-volume bilingual copy of the *Bhāgavata-purāna*. At one point I had placed one of the volumes on top of my folded jacket on the ground next to my seat. The *śāstrī* noticed this and interrupting his discourse, to my extreme embarrassment, addressed me directly saying, “Do not

put that near your feet.” Chastened, I hastily retrieved the volume and kept it safely in my lap thereafter.

7. For a full description of the *saptāh* at Naluna, see TAYLOR 2010.

8. One foreign observer noted that the *mandapācārya* may simply have tripped over the step of the pavilion in the dark.

9. Video recordings of Badrī Prasād Śāstrī giving a *kathā* session at Naluna are available at <http://alturl.com/5gyf> (accessed 1 September 2011).

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