



Gender of *Mohrā* : A Study of faces of deity in Banjar region of Kullu in Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Kullu region in western Himalayas has remained a place of curiosity, imagination and full of narratives due to several factors which are unique in its culture and religion. Its strange rituals, gods and goddesses, traditions remained a field of vast research since long time. *Mohra* that depicts the face of gods, goddesses, rishis and demons has equally generated curiosity amongst researchers where study done by AlkaHingorani presented a strong case of explorations we need to do on *Mohras*. Hence, this field survey was conducted in Banjar region to see the *mohras* lying in various temples of the region. The study tries to explore the depiction of gender and age in *mohras* along with indigenous elements present in its formative features. The study concludes with the observation that all these faces of gods, goddesses, rishis and demons are not only depiction of age and gender but also involves some level of creativity of workman who was assigned the job of make it. Their workshops where these *mohras* are being made form the basic center of this depiction.

Keywords: Kullu, Banjar, Mohra, gender, western Himalayas.

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INTRODUCTION

Present research deals with the study of the *mohrā* which is a unique feature of religious identification of deity in Banjar area of Kullu. The *mohrā* is a facial impression of male and female deities, *rīṣī* and demigods. Though done at smaller level of covering the study of twenty faces of various devīs and devtās of region, but it tries to throw light on lesser worked issue of depiction of age, sex or even racial expressions of devīs and devtās, *rīṣī* and demigods.

Metal mask are called *mohrās* in Himachal Pradesh, notwithstanding the fact that physically and technically they never were intended to serve as facial masks as imaged by some scholars. Most of them were small and, none were provided with apertures for the eyes and breathing. Moreover, since in the most cases, the upper part of the torso was depicted, the label mask has definitely to be discarded and replaced by a more accurate term such as 'bust' which better suits both their morphology and function. However, as the term 'bust' might also give rise to some confusion, *mohrās*, which in Hindi, and in the pahārī dialect means a mask but is applied specifically to these busts.

Most of the *mohrās* of Kullu that adorn a palanquin and represent various regional deities are embossed on the sheets of gold or silver. Of all the *mohrās* on a *pālakī*(palanquin), one is placed in central position, and that *mohrā* is the most important representation of the deity i.e., *malimukha*. A *malimukha* may be embossed, but, more often than not. It is casted from an alloy of eight main elements, called *aṣṭadhātumohrā*. In these *mohrās*, include traces of precious metals such as gold and silver[1]. Large quantities of gold, silver, and *aṣṭadhātumohrā* have been discovered in the Kullu region. It was a few decades ago that the art market started spreading on smaller levels. Bronze was mixed in brass and a long beaming face was formed, with much similarity of the face like the people living in this area[2]. These deities are present in chariots of gold and silver and bronze, I came across during my field visit in the Banjar region from June-October, 2020.

Process of casting the mohrās

During the survey of the area, I interviewed the workman of *mohrās* Shri Labe Singh, Sohni village of Balichowki. He told that for gold, silver or bronze *mohrā*, casting process remains same. Casting structures are already there, it is just the molten metal that is poured inside cast. The economic reason affects the size of seals and *mohrā*. Shri Labe Singh told that when the main *mohrā* of devtā is made, several precautions are taken. Before starting of *mohrā*, the deity whose *mohrā* is to be casted, need to be asked for permission through his/her messenger called Gur. After permission, the work of its casting begins. *Mohrā* is generally made in the night. If time is not auspicious, then *mohrā* has to be made from 3:00 am when the casting and molding of the *mohrā* starts. The person who is casting and making the *mohrā* has to follow fasting until it is finally furnished[3]. The first *mohrā* is made of clay, after which art is made with wax in it. Wax

used is made with bees-wax. After this, soil is applied on it that has to be dried in the sun.

During installation of mohrā, there is another procedure of gem-fixation. It is assumed that the deity decides who will put the gem during the casting. Generally, he is male who performs it wearing a dohtī. Gem is fixed and the coconut as prasāda is distributed. Earlier, gem fixation used to follow animal slaughter as well. It is believed that the *mohrā* of *Āstadhātu* has natural strength, so the first mantra of this mohrā is read by the person who made the *mohrā*, after this *mohrā* is finally fixed on the chariot by the priest[4]. Most of the mohrā of Kullu which is adorned on palanquin is an important representation of various regional deities[1].

Casting *mohrās* last much longer because of the material contents and the process of manufacturing. Thus, they tend to be oldest objects in continuous use on any given pālakī (palanquin), which added to their power and prestige with passing time. They are also the most expensive to replace. When remade, the cost of the material used to a cost mohrā minuscule compare to the expense of the ceremonies and rituals that accompany its fabrication and consecration, and every village of Kullu participates and contributes to the expense[4].

Mohrās in Kullu were made in the technique of cire-perdue that is cast in the technique of lost wax process just like other bronzes. The practice of making bust-length images in this technique still continues to be manufactured in this area. It seems that in the late medieval period another technique for making such type of images out of metal sheets through hammering and chisel work, that is, in the repoussé manner, was introduced in this region which gradually became more popular and is in continuity till day[5].

Ancient feature and age of mohrās

A close observation of mohrās throws valuable light on the aspect of the age of the gods. Though as a thumb rule one can take into consideration that older the mohrā, more is the age of deity. But this thumb rule does not justify their facial expressions and their physical age. The beard of devtā, and wrinkles show that deity is of mature age. The face of a young deity and older one is visible

One interesting aspect that came in to notice during field survey was that older the mohrā, lesser art work will be there. Initial mohrās carry lesser artistic innovations and shows that it was created at a time when the development of art works was starting at small levels. There is no refinement in the artwork and sculptures in the ancient mohrā. The nose is hardly visible in this face or there is some change in the beard, as compared to the modern mohrā. Use of certain new techniques of casting and refinement have been developed which has changed the facial expressions on the mohrā.



Picture 5A
Old mohrā of DeviGādhāDurgā



Picture 5B
New mohrā of DeviGādhāDurgā

A glaring example of what above has been said and noticed are two mohrā of DevīGāḍhāDurgā who holds maximum influence and territory in Banjar region. As the above pictures show, the earlier face in mohrā of DevīGāḍhāDurgā shows that this goddess carried more Mongoloid expressions. On the basis of sharp cut face and , half closed eyes, it can be assumed that this goddess must have come from outside[6]. The second mohrā of the goddess which is presently being used for display on palanquin is more similar to the appearance of the people of the Banjar area. Thus, the mohrā of DevīGāḍhāDurgā depicts the racial expressions that changed with passage of time.



Picture 5C (Upper Caste)
PañchālikāDevī



Picture 5D(Upper Caste)
VumāsiDevtā

There is also the difference of gender in mohrās. As rest of the bust part remains covered, it is through the use of ornaments that one can notice whether deity is a devī or devtā. Here two mohrās are at display. The difference in nose and ear jewelry shows the gender difference. Also huge ceremonious nose-ring depicts marital status of goddess.

The beard of devtā also signifies his gender. The shape of the forehead is also different for devī and devtā. The face of the devtā are shaped like the face of man with broad face and forehead. Also young devtā will have wrinkle-free face and forehead. Thus, devī, devtā, nāg, rīshī, in Banjar region of Kullu district carry different facial, gender and other identities.

In the whole Kullu region including Banjar, the gods are divided on the basis of caste, but mohrā-maker interviewer, ShriLabh Singh Sohni told that there is no separate casting of mohrā is done for high and low caste deity. It is only gender of mohrā that matters[4].



Picture 5E Khodudevta (Lower Caste)

The way the gods are divided on the basis of caste in the entire Kullu districts, we find a different story from the makers of mohrā. The mohrā is more or less same type because main element which is taken into consideration is malimukha and metal consideration goes with aṣṭadhātu of all the deities of all the caste. Socially, the deity of the lower caste is the preserver of the deity of the higher caste. The devtā of lower caste walks with devtā of upper caste.



Picture 5F Śrīngariṣi.

Also it was found that rīṣī do not have mustache. Devī, devtā, rīṣī, nāg, all can be identified through their main mohrā. In this regard, few pictures have been appended for reference that were collected during the field survey.



Picture 5G BālūNāg

As described in the previous pages that the main mohrā reveals the gender and classification of gods, here I would like to specify that who are serpent gods (nāg), are recognized through the specification of snake around their neck which separates their mohrā from other gods and rīṣī. The picture shown above has been appended as an example of identification[4]

Thus there is variation in the mohrā on the basis of age, sex and gender of the devī, devtā, nāg, and the rīṣī. ShriLabh Singh told that the gods whose mohrā does not have a mustache shows that this mohrā was created at the time when that deity was young, thus there can be variations in these mohrā with growing age of devtā[6].



Picture5H Demon

Every devī, devtā, nāg, and the rīṣī has a demon as their servant at service. Something which does not come under their domain but still required to be done, these demons do that for their deity. These demons are half deity, half demon and are considered devī or devtā in their area of influence. For example goddess Hadimba and his son are also seen as demons, but Hadimbā and her son Ghatokcha are worshipped as deity in their respective areas.

Hadimbā and her son Ghatokcha are considered an important example of demigods followed by other demons who live in the service of the gods. They are like gate-keepers who do not allow harmful evil forces to enter the temples. They are also a kind of protector, and are considered as gods though not as influential as their higher-ups are.

CONCLUSION

Thus, survey shows that every mohrā and face is different with their own special characteristics. The caste factor does not influence their casting process but gender of course does. Age is another factor that is depicted in the mohrās of area under study. Third interesting aspect is about the age where certain mohrā of deities were of their young age and later mohrā is depicting the same deity in mature age. Also it needs more exploration whether earlier mohrā was having the same racial expressions or not[4].

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