

ARTICLE

Revisiting the date of Hiḍimbā Devī temple, Manali, Kulu (Himachal Pradesh): a study of epigraphic evidence

Laxman S. Thakur

Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, India
drlaxmanthakur@rediffmail.com

Abstract

A seven-line Ṭākārī inscription on the doorjamb of the Hiḍimbā Devī temple at Manali has as yet remained undeciphered. However, the last line of the inscription was misread by J.Ph. Vogel in 1903–04, and Hirananda (1907–08) simply followed the date earlier suggested by Vogel. Neither has this historic document been translated *in extenso* by Vogel or Hirananda, or any other scholar. This article offers a complete translation of the inscription, its historical significance, and re-establishes the date of the temple from AD 1553 to AD 1551. This was during the reign of Bahādur Singh, the ruler of Kulu, who completed the present structure of the temple, and performed a *yajña* at the temple of the goddess Hiḍimbā during its consecration.

Keywords: Hiḍimbā Devī; *praviṣṭe*; Saṁvat; Ṭākārī; *yajña*

1. Introduction

The Kulu region of Himachal Pradesh has many preserved historical documents, including inscriptions, in Brāhmī and Ṭākārī scripts; only Chamba has more. Vogel (1911)¹ and Chhabra (1957)² have thoroughly documented and translated the known inscriptions of Chamba; however, no such detailed and comprehensive corpus is available on the inscriptions of the Kulu region. The seven-line Ṭākārī inscription discussed in this article is carved on the wooden doorjamb of the celebrated Hiḍimbā Devī temple at Manali in Kulu (Figure 1). The temple of the goddess Hiḍimbā is situated a little above the town of Manali (latitude 32°10' north and longitude 77°15' east) amidst the grove of deodar trees at Dhungri. It is a three-tiered Pagoda style of temple crowned with a round canopy studded with a brass pitcher and a trident. The entire wooden façade of the temple is decorated with the carvings of Brahmanical gods and goddesses, including Śiva-Pārvatī, Viṣṇu-Lakṣmī, Mahiṣāsūramardīnī, Sūrya, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Hanumāna, and the Navagraha panel. The doorframes consist of three superimposed broad *pedyās* (jambs) and *uttaraṅgas* (lintels), and Gaṇeśa is carved in the centre of the *lalāṭa-bimba*.

The inscription is written in the Ṭākārī script on a wooden panel measuring 8.2 cm by 7.4 cm on the right side, which is known in the Chamba region by the name of Devashesha. This inscription is briefly mentioned by J.C. Murray Aynsley, who visited Manali in 1875 and remarked that “on one of the door-posts was a short inscription, which, we were informed, had never been deciphered” (Murray Aynsley 1879:

¹ Vogel's work contains an analysis of about 50 inscriptions dated c. AD 700 to the mid-sixteenth century.

² Chhabra has analysed the later Ṭākārī inscriptions of Chamba.



Figure 1. A front view of Hiḍimbā Devī temple, Manali. Photo: Laxman S. Thakur

282).³ Hirananda (1907–08: 267, 275) commented briefly on the inscription.⁴ In his analysis of the copper-plate grant of Bahādur Singh of Kulu, Vogel also refers to it very briefly but has wrongly deciphered its date (Vogel 1903–04: 264).⁵ It has not been translated *in extenso* by Hirananda, Vogel, or any other scholar. I offer for the first time a full transcription and

³ Ehud Halperin's recent monograph on the cult of Hiḍimbā (Halperin 2020) does not raise the issue of the date of the temple, and Halperin could not find any authentic translation of the inscription.

⁴ Hirananda has referred to two inscriptions: the Hirma inscription and the copper-plate of Bahādur Singh, dated AD 1553 and 1559 respectively.

⁵ Vogel has elsewhere listed it among the Śāradā inscriptions (cf. Vogel 1911: 257).

translation of this inscription. The readings and calculation of Śaṃvat and *praviṣṭe* and their corresponding year and day of the month differ from those of both Vogel and Hirananda (Figure 2).

The writers of the Kulu inscriptions normally follow the Śrī Śāstra Śaṃvat or Saptarṣi Śaṃvat in recording the dates either in constructing the temples or donating the bust (*mohrā*) of *devatās* to the temples by rulers, their family members, and other donees. They record only the years and omit the century. In some instances, the inscribers have added the corresponding years of the Vikramī Śaṃvat or Śaka eras. A fairly accurate



Figure 2. A seven-line Tākārī inscription carved on the doorjamb of the temple. Photo: Laxman S. Thakur

formula for calculating the dates given in Śāstra Saṁvat or Saptarṣi Saṁvat has been suggested by Kielhorn (1891: 151), who has pointed out:

Thus, a current Saptarshi era 36 would, disregarding the hundreds, correspond to an expired year ($36 + 25 =$) 61 of the Kaliyuga; to an expired Śaka year ($36 + 46 =$) 82; to an expired northern Vikram year ($36 + 81 = 117 =$) 17; and to a year $36 + 24/25 = 60/61$ of our own era.⁶

In the Kulu region, the addition of 24 to the Śrī Saṁvat provides an accurate date for the inscribed epigraphs. This is supported by two Ṭākārī inscriptions, dated in the Śrī Saṁvat, found on the foundation wall of the Murlīdhara temple at Chaihni in the Banjar area of Kulu. Two of them are inscribed with dates in both Śāstra and Vikramī Saṁvat. The first is dated in the Śrī Saṁvat 50, and Vikramī Saṁvat 1731. Thus, adding $50 + 24 = 74 =$ AD 1674, and Vikramī Saṁvat would correspond to $(1731 - 57 =)$ AD 1674. The second inscription is dated Śrī Saṁvat 68 (i.e. $68 + 24 = 92 =$) AD 1692. The Vikramī Saṁvat 1749 would also be equivalent to AD 1692 ($1749 - 57 =$) AD 1692. Alexander Cunningham has provided a comprehensive 69-pages of general tables of corresponding dates in various eras, including the Saptarṣi Saṁvat and Vikram Saṁvat,⁷ along with conversion tables to the Gregorian calendar from 60 BC to AD 2000 (Cunningham 1883: 135–203).

2. A seven-line Ṭākārī inscription on the doorjamb of the temple

Text

1. om̐ gaṇeśaya [xx]⁸ pata(?) je nakha. śrī
2. devī hiḍimā prama⁹ de śrī ma.
3. hārāja śrī bahādur sim̐gha jo eka
4. chhatra¹⁰ rāja dehī satara. nata karu
5. vina/bina [x] eka joga bhalā karu. devī
6. re deure¹¹ diṇa darogī dam. saṁ
7. 27 jeṭha pra 2. likha¹² ṣatama.¹³

The most interesting part of the inscription is its dating method. It refers to some unspecified Saṁvat 27 and the month of Jeṭha (Jayeṣṭha) *praviṣṭe* 2 instead of 20 as deciphered by both Vogel and Hirananda. Vogel has incorrectly deciphered the numeral 7 as 9. In Kulu Ṭākārī there is very little difference between the depiction of numerals 7 and 9. The numeral 9 (nine) is slightly curved at the lower end whereas 7 (seven) is almost kept straight down after the use of a top circular loop. Also, the *pra*, an abbreviation of

⁶ Kielhorn has also corrected the date of the Vaidyanātha temple at Baijnath, and assigned it to Śaka 1126, corresponding to 2 May 1204.

⁷ Alexander Cunningham has noted the use of the Saptarṣi era, also known as Loka-Kāla “in the hill states to the south-east of Kashmir between Chenab on the west and the Jumna on the east” (cf. Cunningham 1883: 6).

⁸ Perhaps it reads *nam* as written in two other inscriptions at the Murlīdhara temple at Chaihni.

⁹ It stands for *param deva*, also used in the copper-plate grant of Bahādur Singh of Kulu, dated AD 1559.

¹⁰ Similar phraseology is used in an inscription on the wall of the Murlīdhara temple at Chaihni near Banjar; however, the inscription is from the reign of Bidhi Singh and is dated AD 1674 (cf. Thakur 2012: 540). Line 3 of the inscription reads: *eika chhatra jama jama rāja kari*.

¹¹ The terms *deura* or *dehra* for temple have also been used in the inscriptions of Chamba (see, for example, Vogel 1911: 207).

¹² *Likhu* or *likhya* (written) is a very common feature of the Ṭākārī inscriptions of Kulu also seen in the inscriptions from Chaihni near Banjar (see Thakur 2012: 540–41).

¹³ In the last word the inscriber has used *ṣa* of present-day Devanāgarī for *kha*, also pronounced *kha* in the local Kulluvī dialect as well as in the Ṭākārī script of Kulu.

praviṣṭe in this inscription, is read as 2 instead of 20; Vogel has misread the dot used after 2 for zero, and overlooked the use of similar dots that are used for indicating full stops, or as a mark of punctuation in lines 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6; and finally, after 2 in the last line. In Kulu, zero is always indicated by a circle, not by a dot. At least two letters of the first and one letter of the fifth lines are totally effaced; however, that has not substantially altered the translation and meaning of the inscription.

Let me briefly discuss the inscription's orthographic and palaeographic characteristics. The inscription is written in the cursive Ṭākārī script used in the western Himalayan region from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, with many variants that are found in Chamba, Kangra, Mandi, Sirmaur, and Bushahr. The language of the inscription is the Kulluvī dialect of Western Pahārī. The sign of vowel *o* is regularly used with two strokes above the consonants. One of the typical features of the inscription is the use of a single straight stroke between the two letters for employing two curved strokes on either side to indicate *vī* in the word *devī* and *hi* in *Hiḍimbā* in line 2. The use of a loop at the lower end towards the left in lingual *ḍa* is beautifully carved. A simple straight stroke above a letter represents *e*; for example: *je* (line 1), *de* (line 2: twice), *eka* (line 3), *dehī* (line 4), *devī* (line 5), and *re deure* (line 6). No differentiation has been made between the use of *ta* and *u* and *va* and *ba*. For punctuation marks the inscriber has simply used a dot at least six times. In the last line, *ṣa* is used for *kha*, which is very commonly observed in the Ṭākārī inscriptions from the Kulu region.

3. Translation

Obeisance to the Gaṇeśa. Illustrious Lord (*param deva*)¹⁴ Śrī Mahārāja Bahādur Singh who has ruled authoritatively (gave good governance) (*eka chhatra rāja dehī*) gave or offered a thin (*pata je*) golden nose ring (*nakha*) to the goddess Hiḍimbā and paid homage (*nata karu*)¹⁵ at the temple. He has done a meritorious deed (*bhalā karu*) by performing a *jaga* or a *yajña* (*eka joga*) at the temple of the goddess. Written date-wise (*darogī dam = tithivāra*) in *Samvat* 27, *Jetha praviṣṭe* 2 (corresponding to AD 1551). The end.

4. Concluding remarks

Vogel was pleased to record that he had deciphered the date of the inscription and was able to “date one of the interesting monuments of the Kuḷlū valley” (Vogel 1903–04: 264).¹⁶ As pointed out earlier the Śāstra *Samvat* recorded in the inscription is the 27th year, not the 29th as read by Vogel, and thus corresponds to AD 1551. The space for the inscription is pre-planned, while dividing the wooden panels for carvings to be accomplished on the façade of the temple. It was not possible to inscribe such a long inscription and carve out an ornamented rectangle in the limited space after the completion of the carvings on the doorjambes. As pointed out in the translation given above, it records the name of the king Bahādur Singh of Kulu, who was perhaps responsible for constructing the present temple (*deura*) of the goddess Hiḍimbā. According to the genealogical list of the Kulu rulers, Bahādur Singh was the 75th ruler of the Kulu state; however, there

¹⁴ *Parambhāṭṭāraka* has been used for Bahādur Singh in the copper-plate grant. Here an abbreviated version *prama de* for *param deva* is used (cf. Vogel 1903–04: 268).

¹⁵ *Nau karu* would have an altogether different meaning; that of renovation. If we consider it to be an alternative reading, this would certainly imply that a structure existed at the present site where the footprints of the goddess on a boulder were worshipped by the people, and Bahādur Singh thoroughly rebuilt or renovated it in AD 1551 by providing the wooden door on which the inscription in question is carved. Architecturally, there is no proof of the re-use of earlier fragments in the present structure.

¹⁶ Vogel recognizes this inscription as “one of the oldest epigraphs” (Vogel 1903–04: 264).

is no archaeological record of the first 71 rulers. Only two rulers of the Pāl dynasty, Udhrāṇa Pāl and Sidh Pāl, are briefly mentioned in the Ṭakarī inscriptions. Bahādur Singh's name also occurs in the copper-plate grant, dated in the Śāstra Saṁvat 35 (AD 1559). He consolidated his position in the Beas valley from Manali to Bajaura as he granted a piece of cultivable land to Pandit Ramāpati, at the time of the marriage of his three daughters to Pratāp Singh of Chamba. This piece of land was situated at Hāṭ near Bajaura. The goddess Hiḍimbā was the patron deity of the rulers of Kulu state until the time of Jagat Singh (AD 1637–72) who brought the image of Raghunātha from Ayodhya to Kulu, some time in the mid-seventeenth century, and ruled the state on his behalf. From then on, the rulers of Kulu state called themselves the *golāma* of Raghunātha (servants/slaves of Raghunātha). The construction of a huge temple of the patron deity of the state at Manali was an act of piety and prestige for Bahādur Singh. The offering of a nose ring for the *mohrā* (bust) of the goddess, which was donated by Udhrāṇa Pāl in AD 1418,¹⁷ and a *jaḡa* at the temple complex, suggests that admirable work was done on the completion, or consecration of the temple of the goddess Hiḍimbā.

In the decipherment of the inscription inscribed on the doorjamb of the Hiḍimbā temple, Manali, with a complete translation and the correct readings of the Saṁvat and *praviṣṭe*, makes the temple of Hiḍimbā older by two years eighteen days than do the readings of the Saṁvat and *praviṣṭe* carried out by J. Ph. Vogel in 1903–04, and his faithful assistant Hirananda in 1907–08. The present structure of the temple was completed in AD 1551 and all wooden carvings on the windows, doorframes, and the entire façade were accomplished by that date.

Acknowledgements. The article is based on the field study conducted *in situ* on 15–16 April 2016. The author would like to thank two anonymous referees for BSOAS for useful and precise comments on an earlier draft.

References

- Chhabra, B.Ch. 1957. *Antiquities of Chamba State, Pt. II, Mediaeval and Later Inscriptions*. (Memoir of the Archaeological Survey of India, 72.) New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.
- Cunningham, Alexander. 1883. *Book of Indian Eras, with Tables for Calculating Indian Dates*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co.
- Halperin, Ehud. 2020. *Many Faces of a Himalayan Goddess: Haḍimbā, Her Devotees and Religion in Rapid Change*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hirananda. 1907–08. "Historical documents of Kuḷū", *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*, 260–76.
- Kielhorn, F. 1891. "A note on the Saptarshi era", *Indian Antiquary*, XX, 149–54.
- Murray Aynsley, J.C. 1879. *Our Visit to Hindostan, Kashmir and Ladakh*. London: Wm H. Allen & Co.
- Thakur, Laxman S. 2012. "Some epigraphical discoveries in Kulu (Himachal Pradesh) and their historical significance", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*. New Delhi: Indian History Congress, 539–42.
- Vogel, J. Ph. 1903–04. "A copper-plate grant of Bahādur Singh of Kuḷū", *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*, 261–9.
- Vogel, J. Ph. 1911. *Antiquities of Chamba State: Part I, Inscriptions of the Pre-Muhammadan Period*. (Archaeological Survey of India, New Imperial Series, vol. XXXVI.) Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing Press.

¹⁷ The contents of the Hiḍimbā-*mohrā* inscription are still unknown to me.

Cite this article: Thakur LS (2024). Revisiting the date of Hiḍimbā Devī temple, Manali, Kulu (Himachal Pradesh): a study of epigraphic evidence. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 87, 291–296. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X24000181>