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A Mahābhārata Story from the Kumaon Hills

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Since taking on its present form, around the fifth century A.D., the Sanskrit epic the Mahābhārata has been carried throughout South and Southeast Asia, more often than not retold in local languages and recast in local settings. Vernacular versions of the epic form a large part of the extremely rich oral literature of the Central Himalayas, that is, the hill regions of Garhwal and Kumaon¹ in the northern part of Uttar Pradesh. This is not surprising, since the Mahābhārata itself tells us that its heroes, the Pāṇḍava brothers, ended their earthly careers in the mountains, going higher and higher until they died and reached heaven. Regional tradition confirms this, pointing out temples the brothers founded, hills they tossed up, or lakes they dug in their wanderings; and in Garhwal the Pāṇḍavas are major regional deities who possess people in what are called "Pāṇḍava dances" (see, for instance, Berreman 1962: 381-85). In Himalayan versions of their stories, told and sung in the Kumaoni and Garhwali languages, the setting of the tales, too, becomes a Himalayan one. The great cities of the epic are described as large highland homesteads; while the Pāṇḍavas are still princes, they are princes on the scale of small hill principalities, where lesser princes and greater farmers are sometimes hard to tell apart. Some transformations are really startling: my favorite is the hill tradition that the Mahābhārata war started because the Pāṇḍavas' cat killed the Kauravas' chicken (Pāṇḍey 1962:173).

Here I will be presenting three versions of the story of the meeting and marriage of the Pāṇḍava Bhīma and the demoness Hiḍimbā and of Bhīma's killing of the demoness's brother. The first version is that of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata; the other two are oral versions from Kumaon. Of these, one is a literary retelling published in a scholarly work on Kumaoni folk ballads; I recorded the other directly from a bard during field research near the city of Almora in central Kumaon. The three offer what at least appears to be a progression from a classical prototype into a fully elaborated regional tale in performance. But they are also good stories; and while I will be offering some comments of the scholarly sort, my main purpose is to make them accessible to readers of English.

The Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata gives the story of Hiḍimbā twice: first, at some length, in the Ādiparvan (1.139- 143), immediately after the Pandavas escape from the burning of the Lacquer House; then, much more briefly, during their period of forest dwelling in the Vanaparvan (3.13.85-100). While the first rendition is much richer in detail, the narrative sequence of both is the same. Since the first rendition is too long to include here and easily available elsewhere (e.g., van Buitenen 1973: 294-301), I'll give

¹ These names are Garhwal and Kumau in strict transcription, which I will be endeavoring to follow for most proper names in the texts. An exception will be the nominative Singh; the strict transcription, Sinh, just looks too weird.

only the second, in the van Buitenen translation (1975: 250-251), adding some explanatory material in brackets:

* * *

The glorious men [the Pāṇḍavas] all started out in the night with their mother and went into the large wilderness close to Hiḍimbā's wood. Exhausted, they slept there wretchedly with their mother, and while they slept a Rākṣasī named Hiḍimbā came upon them. [She had been sent by her brother, the horrible Hiḍimbā, to kill them and bring them back for supper.] She took Bhīma's feet and put them firmly in her lap and the beautiful woman caressed them happily with a gentle hand. Immense of soul, mighty and valiantly true to his truth, Bhīma woke up to her and questioned her: "What, blameless woman, is it that you want here?" Hearing their conversation, Hidimba, lowliest of Rākṣasas, arrived, a terrifying apparition of terrible mien, screeching loud: "With whom are you talking? Bring him to me! Hiḍimbā, we shall have a feast, pray don't be long!" But her heart was gripped by compassion; the strong-minded and blameless woman had too deep a pity to betray him. Then he came, the man-eating Rākṣasa, making ghastly noises, and indeed stormed at Bhīmasena. The powerful, furious Rākṣasa impetuously rushed at Bhīma and grabbed hold of his hand with his, a hard adamant hand whose touch was like Indra's thunderbolt. When his hand was captured by the Rākṣasa's, strong-armed Wolf-Belly Bhīmasena did not tolerate it and grew angry; there began an alarming and dreadful fight between Bhīma and Hiḍimbā, who both knew of all weapons... Bhīma killed Hiḍimbā and departed with his brothers, placing ahead Hiḍimbā, who bore him Ghaṭotkaca.

* * *

This story contains two main narrative elements: (1) the Pāṇḍavas' state of relative stability in the forest is disturbed as Bhīma meets and wins the demoness; (2) Bhīma fights and kills her brother, restoring the relative stability of the initial situation while transforming it by the addition of a wife for Bhīma. In the Kumaoni versions I am about to present, both narrative elements are elaborated, but the second far more so, leading, in performance, to the creation of a ritual against demons.

The Central Himalayan region has an extremely rich set of oral literatures transmitted primarily by a category of semi-professional bards. One bardic genre is that of the bhārat or mahābhārat², a term which in Kumaon represents the whole body of bardic narrations that are derived from classical epic or Puranic sources, not just those connected with the Sanskrit Mahābhārata. These stories have usually been transformed-- sometimes drastically--through a period of oral transmission. In fact, the classical versions often exist alongside the versions of the bards, but in very different social settings: while the former are read aloud by Brahman priests and relatively educated villagers as part of worship of the great Hindu gods, the latter are chanted by bards--usually of low caste and little formal education--in rituals involving the regional deities of the Himalayas. Each seems to fill a different niche in village life.

The first Kumaoni version is translated from U.D. Upadhyay's book in Hindi, A Literary and Cultural Study of the Folk Ballads of Kumaon (Upadhyay 1979), a work

²Bhārat is the term used in most published accounts, such as Gaborieau 1975 (and see his references to publications in Hindi). My own informants used mahābhārat for heroic ballads derived from classical sources.

which, beyond its general scholarly merit, is particularly precious for the many retellings of actual ballads that it includes. Hindi is the language of government, education, and most publishing in Kumaon--Kumaoni is used in the home, the tea stall, and in ritual for regional gods. Upadhyay's version has, then, passed through two filters before reaching us: it is his retelling from bardic performances or retellings by the bards themselves; it is his translation into Hindi of a story originally performed in Kumaoni. My own translation, of course, is a third filter.

This version (Upadhyay 1979: 279-80) also begins with the Pandavas living in the forest, but it is a forest in which there is absolutely nothing to eat. Here is the translation of the episode:³

* * *

Bhīmsen said to his family members, "Around here there aren't any [edible] fruits or flowers, and we will certainly die of hunger. So I am going away in search of food, and I'm going to put you people in some safe place." They all agreed with what Bhīm said. Bhīm made a tree-house in a tall tree and settled his family in it and went away looking for food. Going, going, Bhīm came to Hiḍambā's house. Hiḍambā challenged Bhīm to play at swinging with her. "If you win at swinging, then I will go with you; if I win, then you'll stay at my house." Bhīm accepted the challenge. At that time Hiḍambā was pregnant and her months were almost fulfilled. Bhīm and Hiḍambā started playing on the swing. Sometimes the swing would brush one edge of the sky, sometimes it would brush the other. Sometime's Bhīm's side was on the point of winning and sometimes Hiḍambā's side. Finally, when the swing was at its highest on Bhīmsen's side he gave it one extra push upwards. With this enormous jerk of the swing, Hiḍambā's womb fell [i.e., she gave birth] and Hiḍambā lost the swinging game. Out of Hiḍambā's womb fell a child; he tied his umbilical cord around his waist and started to fight with Bhīmsen. Bhīm knocked him down playfully. Both Bhīm and Hiḍambā [the child] went into Hiḍambā's house.

Meanwhile, Hiḍambā's brother Kinkar Dāṇu [i.e., Kinkar the Dāṇava, the demon] went into the jungle where the Pāṇḍavs were taking shelter in a tree. Kinkar Dāṇu saw the Pāṇḍavs up in the tree, and he decided to steal them away and take them to his house. Calling to the Pāṇḍavs from down below, the demon said, "Hey ascetics! There is a pūjā at my house, I've come to invite you all to the pūjā! So let's all go back to my house for the pūjā." The Pāṇḍavs said, "But we're up in this inaccessible tree, how can we get down?" The demon set up a ladder against the tree and underneath it he spread a net. All the Pāṇḍavs came down out of the tree, and Kinkar Dāṇu shut them all up in the net and headed off for home.

Meanwhile, Bhīm was remembering his family. Bhīm went back to that jungle to look for his family. When he got there he saw that the tree-house was empty and there was no sign of the Pāṇḍavs. Lamenting, Bhīm wandered all around the forest.

Kinkar Dāṇu took the net with the Pāṇḍavs in it to a temple of the Goddess [i.e., Kālī] in order to sacrifice them. Outside the temple he did a regular pūjā and when this was finished it was time for the sacrifice. The demon brought all the Pāṇḍavs into the temple and tied them up tight. In his heart, his very heart, he was delighted, thinking, "Today when she gets such powerful offerings, the Goddess will be filled with power [to grant me blessings]." The demon asked each of the Pāṇḍavs who could save them at such

³ The reader will note that Sanskrit final -a after a consonant is usually dropped in both Hindi and Kumaoni: Bhīma becomes Bhīm, Pāṇḍava becomes Pāṇḍav, and so forth.

a time. Each of them told of his own weapon, which now was far away. Only Draupadī said, "Now if Bhīmsen is a warrior at all, then he will save us." The demon burst out laughing: "Bhīm is like a fly, what can he do?"

Meanwhile Bhīm, weeping, weeping, came back to Hiḍambā's house and said to Hiḍambā, "Because of you my family is being destroyed today." Bhīm explained the whole situation to Hiḍambā. Hiḍambā told Bhīm of her brother's evil deed and also told him of the sacrifice of the Pāṇḍavs. Bhīmsen went to that Goddess temple, took on the form of a flower-bug, and hid in a basket of flowers. Bhīm was brought into the temple along with the flowers and he quietly started to eat the materials and offerings for the puja. When it was time for the six Pāṇḍavs to be killed, then Bhīm took on a gigantic form and burst the roof of the temple. The six Pāṇḍavs got out, and Bhīm and the demon started to fight.

Bhīm came out of the temple dragging the demon along behind him. There was a ferocious battle. For seven days and seven nights there was a ferocious battle. Bhīm started to feel pinched by hunger. Because of the hunger, Bhīm started to get tired. In his heart, his very heart, he remembered Queen Hiḍambā. Suddenly Hiḍambā was there, and she started to help Bhīm. Together, the husband and wife put an end to the demon. All the Pāṇḍavs stayed at Hiḍambā's house for some time, then they went back to the jungle to continue their period of forest dwelling.

* * *

Here a couple of central points in the Sanskrit version have grown more elaborate: the meeting and winning of the demoness involves a challenge, a game; the battle with her brother is now brought on by an elaborate plot-line involving abduction, incarceration, imminent slaughter, and escape--almost a reversal of the syntax of the first rendition of the Sanskrit narrative, in which the meeting with the demoness follows the Pāṇḍavas' escape from entrapment and death in the Lacquer House. Another noteworthy change is in the character of Bhīma. In the Sanskrit Mahābhārata he is the biggest, strongest, and fiercest of the brothers, as well as the least clever--a good mate, then, for a demoness. In the Kumaoni versions, on the contrary, Bhīm is the most intelligent and knowledgeable of the brothers. The elaborations and alterations that are evident even in this doubly- or triply-filtered generic retelling of the story are, as we shall see, even more pronounced, more exuberant, in a version collected from a particular bard in a setting close to that of performance.

For Kumaoni bhārat or mahābhārat are, in fact, ritual performances. Done on auspicious occasions in the ritual calendar, especially on long winter nights, they are understood to be offerings of story and song to regional deities ("the three hundred and thirty million gods," as the bards put it), offerings with the power to bring blessings on the household sponsoring the performance. Mahābhārat performance begins with an invocation to the falling evening, an invitation to the gods to be present and accept the offering of story, and a request for them to bless the household where it is being offered. The bard sings the tale in a structure of loose semi-improvised lines made up largely of formulaic fragments that can be combined in different ways.⁴ He has a couple of helpers who sing a long sustained note at the end of each line, allowing him to prepare the next one before singing it. The performance ends with the bard sending the gods back to their abodes. Mahābhārat may also be performed as part of full-scale possession rituals called

⁴ On oral-formulaic composition, see Lord 1960, and now Foley 1988.

jāgar, here again as offerings to divinities who love to hear these edifying tales (see Gaborieau 1975, Leavitt 1985).

As might be expected, such ritually-embedded sung poetry, with its rhythms, its repetitions, its peculiar phonology, and its highly marked context of performance, presents special problems of editing, translation, and presentation. Rather than attempt this here, I offer instead a translation of a mahābhārat story as it was retold in ordinary Kumaoni prose (with occasional asides in Hindi) by a bard who performed it on a regular basis. Indeed, a week later the same bard came back at our urging and did a full ritual performance of the same story--but the presentation of that text will have to await another occasion.

The narrator of this story is the bard Kamal Rām of the village of Jhyūli. He is well known in his area, particularly since his late father, who taught Kamal Rām, was considered the area's finest bard. Kamal Rām came to visit one evening in April, 1982, talk got around to stories of heroes, and he started to tell some very informally, including the story of the Pāṇḍavs translated below. Present, forming a kind of peanut gallery, were myself and my wife, a young man from the village, and two men who were working with us, one a Nepali- and one a Hindi- speaker. The Nepali-speaker, Man Bahadur Thapa, commented fairly regularly through the telling, and I have included his exclamations and comments below--he is "B", the bard is "K", the Hindi-speaker is "M". I didn't say much at the time, but here will be adding explanatory comments, in brackets.

It will be evident that there are some incoherencies in the story, due, no doubt, to my own imperfect understanding. I still haven't figured out the mechanics of the dice game, nor just how many demon sisters are involved at each point in the tale. But on the whole, I think the story is rousing enough to justify even an imperfect presentation of it. I hope, to paraphrase Hilaire Belloc, that this presentation of it makes up in verve what it lacks in coherence.

In translating, I have tried to err on the literal side.

* * *

K: She [Kunthā, the Pāṇḍavs' mother] said, "See here, children. Many days have gone by since your father passed away, and you haven't done his funeral rites [sarād, Sanskrit śrāddha]. One day you have to do your fathers' [i.e., your ancestors'] funeral rites." "Okay."

Dropadī went to fill her golden pot with water. [She meets the Iron-Devil Demon, Luvāsuri Daint, disguised as a Brahman pandit--and a pandit is needed for performing funeral rites.] He asked--he said, the demon said, he said, "Here are the five Pandav brothers. And today is their fathers' funeral. They have called for me. Now I have forgotten the way, where would their house be? Where is their palace? Tell me that." She said, "I am Arjun's wife. At our place we're doing funeral rites. Let's go there." She touched his feet, he was a pandit. He said, "Let's go then." Now they set off, the demon went there.

Now Bhīm Singh was sitting there. Bhīm Singh said to his Mother Kunthā, he said, he said, "Mama, look here. He doesn't look like a pandit to me. No, he looks like a demon to me. Look how his eyes are shifting back and forth. And look at his body, look at his legs, there's so much dirt there you could dig it off. And look at what his nails are like. And what are a pandit's nails like, what are his hands like? What are his lips like? Mama, look, he's not what he appears--we have to realize that he's a demon."

She said, "Son, Bhīm Singh, look here, talking like this. You've really gotten out of hand. You've got no brains and no sense. How can you talk like that? Look here,

this is our respected pandit, our family priest. What do you think you're saying?" She bawled him out, she bawled him out. He said, "Okay, all right then."

Then he said, the demon said, "If this is Bhīm Singh here, he'll kill me. What can I do about it?" He called the four brothers. He said, "Brothers, look." He got out his horoscope and stuff. He said, "Look, anyone who wants to do the funeral rites for his fathers, this is how he has to go about it. He has to bring oil from the Garden of Death." Now where can you find oil from the Garden of Death? "You have to put it on a black snake. And then you can do the funeral rites, but not without that."

And then those four-five brothers said, Arjun said, "Who will go?" Nakul said, "Who will go?" "Who will go?" "Who will go?" "Who will go?" He said, the demon said, the one who had made himself into a pandit, he said, "Whoever is the smallest brother of all, send him. He's intelligent, he'll bring it."

B: The strongest one of all, send him.

K: He was also afraid of him. He said, "If this one leaves, if he goes away, I'll capture them all."

B: I'll kill them all. Right.

K: Bhīm Singh said, "Okay, I'll go." He set out on his journey, Bhīm Singh did. He went a little distance and there he fell asleep. He went peacefully to sleep. He said, "Now the situation has gotten bad. Forget it, I'm going to sleep." A twelve-year sleep came upon him, upon Bhīm Singh.

B: Okay, so then he went to sleep.

K: So he went to sleep. At one meal he'd eat twenty-one pir of food. In the morning a twenty-one-pir-eater, in the evening a twenty-one-pir-eater too. That's how he filled his belly, Bhīm Singh was so strong.

Now the pandit said, the one who was a demon, he said, "Brothers, do this. Now he'll bring it, oil from the Garden of Death, he'll bring it soon, he'll bring it soon. We should begin our own work. Come on," he said. He called the four brothers before his face. And the sixth one, Kunthā, he called her too. And the seventh who was there, Dropadī, he called her too. He said, "Come," he said. He asked them for a big brass bowl and some water. He said, "Come," he said, "I will show you the images [darsan] of your fathers," he said. He asked for some water in a big brass bowl, he put the water in the bowl. He said, "Look," he said, "Look at your fathers," he said. They saw their reflections, didn't they? They started to look. Behind them, he opened up a net. When he had opened his iron-devil net, he threw it over all their heads. He made a knot in it. He threw it over his shoulder and off he went.

So, sahab, he threw it over his shoulder and took off. Now what happened there? Thirty-three frybreads, thirty-two fritters were there, they were cooking on the hearth. What happened then? [Dropadī said, inside the net:] "Now this demon will not let us live. Now who will save us?" she said. "Where will my divar [husband's younger brother] Bhīm Singh come from?"

B: Bhīm Singh will come now.

K: "And he's the one who will save us. And he'll come looking for us, searching for us." She broke her necklace of gold and dropped pieces of it all along the way.

Now that demon, going, going, going, he came to his demon fortress. He said, "Lock them up, the Pāṇḍavs." Then they locked up the Pāṇḍavs there.

Now when Bhīm Singh's sleep had lasted twelve years, Bhim Singh's sleep opened up. He said, "Now he's taken them away." Bhīm Singh was awfully knowledgeable. He thought about it. He said, "So now it's happened."

Now he himself came back, he came back to shady Jaiti Homestead [Syoi Jaiti Bārā; Pandey 1962: 173 has the Pāṇḍavs living at Seli Jaiti Bārā]. There he saw that thirty-three kinds of food, thirty-two fritters were cooking. He started to eat and drink, ḍaKAM! Easily he ate however much food had been made, all of the fried bread and fritters for the day of the funeral rites. He went to the hearth. As much as was there, he gobbled it down all at once. He went to his golden bed and fell asleep. He said, "Let all those bastards die. [The word is sāv, "wife's brother". To explain it would require a discourse on North Indian kinship.] I told them so." Then there came to him some serious thinking about it. He said, "Okay, look. I'm not being Bhīm Singh." Now he became angry. "Today I must go."

He set off from there. He kept seeing the pieces of his bhauji's [elder brother's wife's] necklace as he went along. He arrived there. When he arrived, he was a little bit on this side of the demon fortress. What happened there? That demon that had taken them away, that demon had two little sisters there, on the road. They were married [?]. Their names were Heṛmā and Kheṛmā. [Heṛmā is a predictable transformation of Hiḍimbā]. What were they doing there? They were gambling, throwing dice. To do that they had spread a twenty-two-hand wide cloth. They had hung a woman's veil [ghagari] over the road. [Men are not supposed to go under a woman's veil]. A sign had been written saying, "Whoever comes here first must jump over this fifty-two league cloth. And then he must gamble, he must play at dice with my sisters. Then he can go on. Any son of a mother who is not dead who comes here will go under the veil [or else, presumably, gamble with the demon's sisters]." Thus he [the demon] wrote the sign.

So the two sisters Heṛmā and Kheṛmā what did they do? They had stakes for gambling at dice. Whichever was the losing stake, whichever was the absolutely losing throw, was decorated with pure gold, was made clean. Whichever was the winning stake was covered with filth and mud [to trick passers-by].

Now when Bhīm Singh arrived there he saw that sign. He said, "Okay!" The hairs of his forearms stood up from his forearms, the hairs of his waist stood up from his waist. On his buttery throat hundred-hundred maund goosebumps sprang up. He saw the veil hung up and the twenty-two-hand cloth spread out. He jumped the twenty-two handsprands; when he did his Eastern Leap, Bhīm Singh jumped over the twenty-two-hands wide cloth. Then what happened? He sat right down. To throw dice.

So there he was. They said, the two sisters said, "Look, our bhin [elder sister's husband] has come, our bhin has come! Our bhin has come," they said. What did Bhim Singh say? "I am very thirsty for water. Get me some water. First I'll drink some water. Bring some water." Now she did like this with the loser's stake [pushing it forward for him]. She sat herself down at the winner's stake. She said, "Bhin, sit down, bhin, please, for a little while, bhin. Let's play, let's shoot some dice. Sit down, sit down."

Now Bhīm Singh said, "I have a great thirst. First bring water." Now she said, "Go ahead, servant girl [literally, "orphan"]. Go ahead, bring some water," she said. Her little servant girl, right? Now Bhīm Singh said, "Look, sāi [wife's sister]," he said, "I won't drink water from her hand [i.e., from a servant's hand]. You go ahead, you go, then I'll drink. I won't drink water from her hand." Now she was compelled to go. She went away to get some water. Bhīm Singh sat down there [at her stake]. Now she

brought the water. She said, "Go ahead, bhin, have a drink of water." Now Bhīm Singh said, "May this water catch fire! [i.e., "To Hell with this water!"] First let's play a couple of rounds. I won't drink any water now. Sit." Now Bhīm Singh himself was sitting at the winner's stake. She was sitting at the loser's stake. Now he was throwing all fives and sixes.

B: Six, sweet six, five, sweet five!

K: Right. So he won so much, he even won the two sisters themselves. And he won so much he won the little servant girl too.

M: He won it all, brother.

K: He won so much that he won it all. He said, "Brother, now I'll go on," Bhīm Singh said. They said, "Bhin, look, now we have become yours. Now we'll come with you." He said, "Look," Bhīm Singh said, "Look. First my... my five brothers are caught in a net. And my bhauji Dropadī, she's caught in the net too. My mother Kunthā, she's caught in the net too. Now you tell me, who has brought them to this?" Since he had made them his own, they told him the whole story. She said, "It was my elder brother, in such and such a way he brought the five Pāṇḍav brothers and has tangled them up in a net. And," she said, "tomorrow he is doing pūjā to his goddess Kālikā. And he's going to make a sacrifice to her tomorrow."

B: Oh my god!

K: He said, "Okay. Okay, now I'm going. Now when I come back I'll take you with me. Now you stay here. When I come back I'll take you with me."

When Bhīm Singh left that place, now what was the demon doing? He had built a temple to Kālikā. And he had made the preparations for the sacrifice the next day. Now he was saying, "We're going to do a pūjā to Kālikā. And these Pāṇḍa-birds here"--he was calling them "Pāṇḍa-birds" [panucar] --"these Pāṇḍa-birds, we're going to make them the sacrifice. In Kālikā's temple we're going to cut off their heads."

B: Just like that, all of them?

K: Yup. That's what he was going to do.

Now when Bhīm Singh was on the road there, Bhīm Singh was on the road, he met a blacksmith on the road. He'd made a trident. Bhīm Singh said, "Hey you, where are you taking that trident? What do you think you're doing?" Now he said, the blacksmith, he said, "Great King," he said, "our master is having a pūjā. It's tomorrow," he said. "It's a pūjā for Kālikā," he said, "he's sacrificing some Pāṇḍa-birds. Now he's asked for this trident for the temple." Bhīm Singh said, "Okay. Now what portion of the sacrifice will you be getting [in payment]?" He said, "Great King, I'm just a blacksmith. What kind of a portion will I get? I'll get a couple of feet or something."

B: Oh my god.

K: "My portion will be a foot or something," he said. "A shank. What they call a lower leg, sahab, right? When they sacrifice a goat. "I'll get a shank," he said. He said, "Okay." Bhīm Singh grabbed him. He tore off his lower leg and stuck it in his mouth

[which is what is done to sacrificed goats]. Then he went on his way. He tore off the blacksmith's foot and so forth, he twisted it, stuck it in the blacksmith's mouth, and took off.

He went on ahead from there, he went down the road. On the road he met a--what do they call them?--a basketmaker, he was carrying a dāl, like a really really beautiful basket that he had made. He asked him, he said, "Hey, where are you taking that dāl basket?" Bhīm Singh said to him. He said, "Oh Great King," he said, "look here. Our master," he said, "is a demon. And now tomorrow," he said, "he's doing a pūjā for Kālikā," he said. "And he's going to sacrifice Pāṇḍa-birds. And he asked for this," he said. "This is for offering in the temple, this basket." He said, "Okay." He said, "Tell me, friend, what portion will you be getting?" He said, "Oh Great King, what'll I get? I'll just get the back or something like that." Bhīm Singh said, "Okay." He grabbed him, he twisted his back around and stuck it in his mouth.

From there he went on, he went on. There was a flower-gardener, there was a flower garden, the flower-gardener was picking flowers. In a dāl basket, he was picking flowers, he was putting beautiful beautiful flowers in it. He asked him, he said to him, "Where are those flowers going?" He said, "Look," he said, "our master is doing a pūjā. And it's a Pāṇḍa-bird sacrifice. It's a puja to Kālikā. These flowers are going to Kālikā's temple," he said. He said, "Okay."

Bhīm Singh seized his mother Kunthā's truth. He seized his bhauji Dropadī's truth. He said, "Bhauji, look, I'm coming to find you." And he seized his mother's truth. He said, "Mother, look, you are all closed in. Where you are closed in I will open up. Please change my shape," he said. "Please put on me the shape of a fly.

B: A miracle indeed.

K: Well, Bhīm Singh abandoned his own shape, he put on the shape of a fly, and he sat in a flower just like that. In the lightest flower of all, in that flower sat Bhīm Singh in the shape of a fly.

Now what was the demon doing? Struck by fear, saying, "Through what trick will Bhīm Singh come here?", he was weighing the flowers. Any flowers that came in, he would weigh them. Any flower that was heavy would be thrown away. Any that were light would be offered up to Kālikā.

Now Kālikā's pūjā was ready. He started to weigh those flowers. And any flower that was light, it was offered up directly in the temple; any that was even a little bit heavy, it was tossed into a pot of oil, it was deep-fried! "What shape is Bhīm Singh coming in?" they were saying. They were very worried. Then they put a flower in the scale, it was the lightest flower of all, the one that Bhīm Singh was sitting in. So where did they put that flower? They put it right on top of Kālikā's ling [i.e., linga, the phallic pillar of Lord Śiva], the one Bhīm Singh was sitting in.

Then they started to do Kālikā's pūjā. The demons joined their hands, they bowed down. However many demons there were, they were all gathered there.

Now Bhīm Singh had to piss. Bhīm Singh, now where is he supposed to go, Bhīm Singh? Bhīm Singh pissed, from the top of the ling, from the top of their Kālikā's ling. Now the demons that were there said, "She is very happy!" they said, "Mother Ganga herself has come here to this place," they said. The demons were bathing in it, they were washing in it.

B: In that very water!

K: They were sprinkling it around as holy water [amrt]. They were saying, "Today our--today our Kālikā is very happy," they said. "Behold," they said, "Bhagvān," they said, they were joining their hands, they were bowing down. "See, today Mother Gangā," they said, "has come to this very place," they said.

B: In our temple.

K: Now they, now they brought the net there, into Kālikā's temple. The net the Pāṇḍavs were in, they brought it there. Now when they brought in the net they asked, the demon asked Arjun, he took his sword in his hand, he said, "Look, now I've brought you here," he said, "today we are going to sacrifice you. Today I am going to sacrifice you. Now who is going to save you?" Arjun said, "Demon, look. You tricked us and now you have brought us here. Now who is going to save us? Now you go ahead and sacrifice us." A second brother said the same thing, a third brother did too. Kunthā, their mother, she said the same thing. Now that wife of Arjun's, Dropadī, he asked her. He said, "Look, Dropadī. Who is going to save you now? Now we are going to sacrifice you." Dropadī said, she said, "Go ahead, demon," she said, "You tricked us and brought us here. You're not about to spare us. Go ahead and sacrifice us now." She said, "Yes...

But if my divar Bhīm Singh were to come, then he'd be the one to save us," she said. "You're not going to spare us," she said, "you demon. So go ahead and sacrifice us," she said.

When she said this, the hairs of Bhīm Singh's forearms stood up from his forearms, the hairs of his waist stood up from his waist, on his buttery throat hundred-hundred maund goosebumps sprang up. Bhīm Singh said to himself-- Now Bhīm Singh abandoned his shape as a fly, he took on his form as Bhīm Singh. BaDAM! Bhīm Singh leapt up. "Coming on out!" he said. He burst out of Kālikā's temple. When Bhīm Singh arrived there he got out his Eastern Thorn [the name of his sword]. Each-each demon's head he cut off. Bhīm Singh was waging battle. Each-each demon he cut down, a hundred-hundred demons were born. He'd cut down one demon, a hundred demons were born.

So Bhīm Singh started to wield his Eastern Thorn, he was waging battle, was Bhīm Singh. He cut down one demon, a hundred demons were born. A bloody Gangā, a Gangā of gore Bhīm Singh sank down into. And then Bhīm Singh started to get tired, he started to get sleepy. He was starting to get hungry. Then he went into a dream of sleep. "My mother, now she is all shut in." Now he said to his mother, "Mother, look, I am sinking down into a Gangā of gore. I'm getting sleepy, too. And now I'm getting hungry, too." His mother sent him a spurt of milk--then Bhīm Singh went ḍaKAM! Then his mother said to Bhīm Singh, "Crush a black bumble bee under your heel. Throw a white bumble bee up into the sky." When Bhīm Singh crushed a black bumblebee under his heel, threw a white bumblebee up into the sky, then the heads of the hundreds of demons stopped, the demons stopped regenerating themselves. Then he got his brothers out of the net and put them on his shoulders. Then they say:

"Today you have cut, you have cut, oh the five Pāṇḍav brothers have cut the net,

"Oh you have cut the net, Lords, the five Pāṇḍav brothers have opened what was closed."

B: Then they cut it.

K: Then they cut the net. It's iron devil net.

B: After they've made a model [namunā].

K: They cut the model, that's it. They cut the net.

* * *

What Kamal Rām is describing here is a ritual done at the end of the performance of this story. The family holding the telling has, with the help of the bard, prepared a little net of string. At the end of the story, while the Pāṇḍavs themselves are being released, all of those present, especially the household members, participate in cutting this "model" net with knife or scissors. This act releases them from the grip of demons and is felt to be powerful against being trapped by trouble in general. Both the story itself and the external process of storytelling end with bandi rē khulāsa, the opening of what is closed. In fact, this seems to be part of the justification for telling the story--like much South Asian literature, oral or otherwise, it is effective as well as pleasing.

This version of the story, which is very close in content to the one Kamal Rām sang in full performance a week later, goes much farther in elaborating those elements which were already noteworthy in the published Kumaoni version. Bhīm and now two demon sisters engage in a complicated dice game with lots of detail; Bhīm not only hides in the flower but pisses out of it, provoking a staggering display of demonic stupidity; and he himself is not only the most intelligent, but also the youngest of the brothers, a complete reversal of his role in the Sanskrit epic. In addition, a change of name thoroughly localizes him: the Sanskrit Bhīmasena becomes Bhīmsen in Kumaoni, and this bard, at least, has heard it as Bhīm Singh. "Singh" is a caste-marker borne by all Kumaoni men of the warrior caste. To call the hero "Bhīm Singh" is to give him a name that is extremely common in rural Kumaon. All of these changes point to a continuing process of local elaboration by bards who have their audiences and themselves to amuse and please.

The direction of transmission should not, however, be taken for granted. These stories have been presented as if a rather straightforward ancient epic episodes have been carried to outlying areas such as Kumaon, where they form the kernel for in some cases extravagant local developments. Certainly the corpus of written Sanskrit literature is an ancient one, a relatively fixed one, and one that remains available for Hindus to draw on and elaborate orally; and this is indeed my impression of what has happened to the story of Bhīma, Hiḍimbā, and her brother. But to stress this single direction of transmission from classical to folk, from Great Tradition to Little Tradition, is to forget that things operate both ways. We should remember that classical written literature such as the Mahābhārata, however hoary, started out as oral literature, which had to have a source somewhere. Indeed, Gerald Berreman was so struck by the importance of the Pāṇḍavs in the hills that he postulated that they "may well be indigenous objects of worship in this area who have been universalized to become part of the literary tradition of Hinduism" (1962: 382). Maybe local lore of the Pāṇḍavs has been developing in the hills for a very long time indeed; and while it has been influenced by fixed classical texts, this is only one of many sorts of influences it has undergone, including the overwhelming influence of the Central Himalayan social--and physical--landscape. While mahābhārat draws on the Mahābhārata, folk tale draws on fixed tale, this very "drawing on" is an indication of the relative independence of oral tradition, of a life of its own.

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