



MALANA

A Lost Utopia In The Himalayas

(Published in Vihangama Vol. V November-December 2002)

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Below the Chanderkhani pass of the Kulu Valley lies a small cluster of around two hundred stone roof houses constituting a village called Malana. Its inimitable culture and the temple of Jamlu distinguish the village. The village consists of around 1500 inhabitants and has an impeccable system of administration with a higher and lower court guided by the spirit of village God Jamlu. Malana stands out as an autonomous self-sufficient unit whose inhabitants claim Greek ancestry.

Some fanciful stories about the village called "a little greece," as also its drug mafia with its do's and don'ts, are often published in newspapers and magazines. However, what distinguishes this village in the interior of the Himalayas is its architecture, language, worship rituals and autonomous administrative system. The unique geographical location of Malana has enabled it to preserve its biodiversity and it is an ecological haven.

Malana is connected to Kulu by three mountain passes - it can be reached from Parbati valley crossing over the 3180 metres Rashol Pass and via Nagar over the 3600 metres beautiful Chanderkhani pass. The easiest way to reach Malana is from Jari, which is a 23 km picturesque trek to Malana. Jari is two hours drive from Kulu and is situated at the confluence of the Malana and Manikaran *nallah*, which join to form the Parbati River.

Jari is an entry point to Malana. About 1.5 km from Jari is the Malana powerhouse and visitors have to register their names before entering the valley. From the powerhouse to the dam is a 10 km trek and thereafter it is an uneven trek of 7 km to Malana. The last 4 km stretch to Malana is treacherously uphill. But the greenery all around with interceptions of waterfalls and streams make the climb bearable. About 2 km from Malana powerhouse is Chowki, a small hamlet, and the only towering structure in the village is the Shiva temple. This is the nearest village to Malana. However, the people of Chowki have nothing in common with the Malanese.

According to a story from mythology, Jamdagni Rishi is the father of Parashuram, one of the 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu. After his intense prayers, Shiva appeared before him. Jamdagni Rishi asked for a secluded place, full of nature's bounty. Shiva told him to go to Malana. The Rishi's two brothers followed him. In order to avoid them, he created a mist in the valley and told them that the place was not good. His brothers left his company and one went to Lahoul

and the other to the Banjar Valley. Malana was already in the control of a *Rakshasa* when the Rishi reached there. The *Rakshasa* Banasura resisted him. The conflict between Jamdagni Rishi and Banasura ended with a peace treaty, according to which, administration and justice were to be handled separately. While administration was with Banasura, justice was kept under the preview of Jamdagni Rishi. In case of a dispute in the administration, it was to be sorted out by the judiciary. The Kanashi language was made mandatory for those living in Malana, as also the customs and traditions prevalent there. During the festivals, the first sacrifice was to be made to Banasura. With the passage of time, Jamdagni Rishi gained superiority over Banasura, but the village retained its traditions, which are still followed there.

Malana is divided into two - upper Malana (Dhara Beda) and lower Malana (Sor Beda). Except for two families of *Lohars* and *Julahas* who came to the village as drummers and were allowed to settle there, Malana is inhabited by only Rajputs. A stone-lined path goes through the centre of the village where people can be seen lazing around, or playing dice, locally called *panji*. For the outsiders, there is a long list of do's and don'ts to be followed in the village. The people are friendly but outsiders are told to keep distance and not to touch anything in the village. Photography is allowed in the village, but not videography. The *Dharamshalas* (rest houses) in the centre court of the village are richly decorated with wooden carvings depicting flora and fauna, which include peacocks, horses, elephants, birds, dancers and various flowers. The *Dharamshalas* are meant for pilgrims visiting the shrine of Jamdagni Rishi on festive occasions.

Houses in Malana are of two or three storeys and each storey has a specific name and purpose. The ground floor is called *khudang* which acts as a cattle shed and where the firewood and fodder for the sheep and goats are stored. The first floor called *Gaying* is used to store eatables, wood and for weaving woolen fabric. The top floor with an over hanging balcony is called *pati*. It is the living quarter. The houses are built of alternate bands of stone and timber. The inner walls are plastered with mud. The outer side is entirely made up of wood.

Kanashi, the language of Malana, does not resemble any of the dialects spoken in its neighbourhood but seems to be a mixture of Sanskrit and several Tibetan dialects. This sort of amalgamation makes it difficult for an alien to understand it. Language is also considered to be one of the secrets of the village and outsiders are not allowed to use it for communication. The *Julaha* and *Lohar* families who have been staying in the village since the last five decades are not allowed to speak Kanashi. There is a single teacher government primary school with 100 children on the rolls. The school building also houses an Ayurvedic dispensary and the *panchayat ghar*. There is a middle school with a science teacher, Sanskrit teacher and history teacher. The middle school was established in 1966. Although there are four teachers, the number of students is only 13. Up to the primary level midday meals are provided. Girl students are provided free books. So far only two students in the village have managed to reach class 12.

The people of Malana are very conscious about preserving their ecological heritage. According to the village rules, fixing nails on a tree and burning of fire in the forest of Malana are prohibited. Only dry twigs and branches are allowed to be carried away from the forest. Hunting is not allowed without the permission of the village council. The livelihood of Malana is farming and cattle rearing. They also collect herbs in the upper reaches, which find a good market. Two important festivals are celebrated in Malana. One called *Badoh mela* is celebrated in August and the other called *Fagdi mela* in February. On these festive occasions people from nearby villages come to this place. Holy relics of Jamdagni Rishi in the form of

instruments, jewellery, garments are kept on display. Men and women dance in their traditional attire consisting of *Chola*, *kalgi* (round cap) and tight *pajams*, to the beats of the *Nagara*, *Shanani*, *Karnali* and *Narsingha*. Marriage is a simple affair without any priest or ritual. The locals call it the *Rakshasi* marriage. The bride goes after the groom to his house. In case of divorce, the boy has to arrange a separate house, food etc. for the girl. Divorced women and widows can remarry. Polygamy is allowed for men. Similarly, there are not elaborate last rites. The dead are cremated and the rituals last three days.

The shrine of Renuka Devi is situated in lower Malana. The Shrine with its intricate woodwork is noteworthy for its architectural excellence. Horns of animals sacrificed in the temple complex are usually fixed on the facade of the temple. The original abode of Jamdagni Rishi is said to be at Baginda, 15 km from Buntar. Another shrine of Jamdagni Rishi is at Tosh village, 6 km from Pulga. The village priest is the only person in the village to wear a white turban. The position passes from father to son.

The village has a democratic set up and the village council is called *Hakima* and consists of *Goor*, *Pujari* and *Kardar* representing higher court and *Jestha* the lower court. *Pujari* and *Kardar* are hereditary posts and are representatives of the *Jamlu devta*. *Kardar* is second in hierarchy. There are four elected members from the village called *Jestha*. Each *Jestha* can select one more member called *Pogudar* and the total elected members come to eight. Out of these eight, one person is elected as *Pradhan* (chief) and the other is *upapradhan*. *Goor* is a person said to be possessed by the spirit of *Jamlu devta*. Any person from the village can be a *goor*. Once a *goor* is identified and accepted, he has to wear a cap and keep long hair. When possessed, *goor* listens to the woes of the villagers and directs them to do remedies.

The village judicial system though outdated is novel in its own way. The unanimous decision of the lower court is sent to the higher court for final verdict. On the basis of this participatory court procedure some scholars trace the origin of Malana *Hakima* to the ancient Greece. If a villager wants to take the help of police, he has to pay a fine of Rs. 1000 to the village council. In most cases, the guilty are fined. Anyone defying the decision of the village council is thrown out of the valley. In extreme cases of theft or misuse of the God's treasures, a stone is tied to the culprit and he is pushed down the mountain slopes.

Malana is an interesting study of how isolated villages retain their socio-cultural characteristics.