

# Malana : Shangrila in the Himalayas

An Exhibition of Photographs by Virendra Bangroo and Krzysztof Stronski

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## Introduction

A civilized society in a country like India originates in the village where people of different identities interact for mutual benefit, self-sufficiency and autonomy. All villages outwardly appear to be similar but each has its core, a soul, which is as distinct as one fingerprint from the other. There are what are called artist villages, epic villages, shrine villages, fringe villages and forsaken villages distinguished by their inhabitants and their traditions. Of these, in Himachal Pradesh, the most distinctive are the shrine villages. In every such village there is a presiding deity recognized by people of all religions on the basis of faith only. Malana is one such village in the district Kulu that has preserved its age-old traditions and customs.

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 even a higher and lower court guided by the spirit of village God Jamlu. Malana stands out as an autonomous self-created unit whose inhabitants claim Greek ancestry.

The Republic of Malana; a little Greece in Malana; the Drug Mafia in Malana; do's and don'ts in Malana - all sort of fanciful stories are being regularly published in newspapers and magazines. A Malanese is subject to all sorts of probes and investigations.

However, what distinguishes this village in the interior of the Himalayas are the striking characteristics such as:

- Persistent & adamant effort by the inhabitants to retain their unique age-old heritage.
- Inaccessibility of the village so far makes it a greater attraction for adventure tourists and scholars alike.
- Unique geographical location, which has preserved its bio-diversity and is an ecological heaven.
- The village God is considered by the inhabitants as superior in power as compared to those of the other Gods in the Kulu valley.
- Their manner of worship is strikingly different from the usual Himachal traditional rituals.
- Some words of the language and the architectural motifs are arguably of Greek provenance.
- A strange legend exists related to Emperor Akbar legitimizing pre-eminence of the Jamlu devta.
- Language locally called Kanashi does not belong to the Indo-Aryan group and serves and acts as a medium of communication among the Malanese only. Architecture is also unique and each architectural structure has a specific purpose and bears a vernacular name.
- The motifs on the residential houses have no resemblance to those in the adjoining regions. The motifs have connotations, which could be of interest to scholars.
- An elected village judiciary enforces rules and regulations adopted over the centuries for the benefit of the Malanese.

## Malana : Geographical Location

Malana valley 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 kms 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 one and half kilometers from Jari is the Malana powerhouse and one has to register his or her name here before entering the valley. From the power house to the dam is a 10 kms trek and thereafter it is an uneven trek of 7 kms to Malana. The last 4 kms stretch to Malana is a treacherous uphill trek. But the greenery all around with interceptions of waterfalls and streams keeps one's spirit high. About 2 kms from Malana powerhouse is Chowki, a small hamlet and the only towering structure in the village is the Shiva temple. This is the only village in the region, which is near to Malana separated by 15 kms. However, the people of Chowki have nothing in common with the Malanese.

## **A Peep into its History**

Jamdagni Rishi in the days of yore worshipped Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesha. After his intense prayers, Shiva appeared before him and told him to ask for a boon. Jamdagani Rishi asked for a place, secluded and 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 mist in the valley and told his brothers that the place was not good and further said that if they want to stay they could. His brothers left his company and one of them went to Lahoul and the other to the Banjar valley. Malana was already in the control of a big Rakshasha when Rishi reached there the Rakshasha retaliated, which resulted in a fight between the two.

The conflict between Jamdagni Rishi and Banasura ended with the understanding on the following terms :-

1. Administration and justice were to be handled separately
2. The members of the executive were to be selected in consultation with Banasura.
3. Justice was kept under the preview of Jamdagni Rishi.
4. In case of a dispute in the administration it was to be sorted out by the judiciary.
5. The Kanashi language was made mandatory for those living in Malana, and also the customs and traditions prevalent there.

During festivals, the first sacrifice was to be made to Banasura the Rakshasha. With the passage of time, Jamdagini Rishi gained superiority over Banasura, but the village retained its traditions which are still followed there.

## **Social structure**

An exotic atmosphere catches hold of the visitor once he enters the village - houses with their antique look and the people in their traditional attire - it seems to be a different world altogether.

Malana is divided into two divisions - upper Malana (Dhara Beda) and lower Mala (sor Beda). It is inhabited by Rajputs only besides two families of Lohars and Julahas who came to the village as drummers and were allowed to settle there. Malana Rajputs have four sub-divisions.

1. Dhamyani Rajputs
2. Dhurani Rajputs
3. Nagvani Rajputs
4. Pachani Rajputs

Dhamyani and Dhurani Rajputs stay in upper Malana and Nagvani and Pachani Rajputs reside in lower Malana. In terms of hierarchy the Dhamyani is on the top and Panchani is at number four. This division in terms of classes is for name sake as the people intermarry and share each other's burden.

A stone lined path goes through the centre of the village where people can be seen lazing on the ground 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. Don't touch anything signboards forbidding one to touch anything are conspicuously placed 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.

Most of the names of the villages are based on the name of the day they are born. For example :

A Sunday born person is Ahuta  
A Monday born person is Suanru  
A Tuesday born person is Mangal  
A Wednesday born person is Budh or Bui  
A Thursday born person is Bestru or Bei  
A Friday born person is Shukru  
A Saturday born person is Shani Charu or Sheyi

There is also the custom of a new born male baby being given the same name as that of his grand father. Ladies call their husbands by name contrary to the tradition prevalent in the rest of India.

## **Architecture**

The Dharamshalas (rest houses) in the Center 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 two or three storied 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 Gayang is used to store eatables, wool and fer weaving woolen fabric. The top floor with an over hanging balcony is called pati. It is the actual 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 and acts as a verandah.

## **Language**

From the linguistic point of view Malana appears to be an island. The language of the village, called Kanashi, is unintelligible for outsiders from the Kullu or Parvati Valley, who speak dialects belonging to Indo-European family of languages. It has been classified as a Sino-Tibetan tongue, related to Milchang which is a sub-branch of Kinnauri (a group of dialects spoken in Kinnaur).

According to the 1961 census, language speakers were 563. Today the population of Malana is at least three times as large as 40 years ago.

Although villagers claim to be descendants of Alexander the Great soldiers there is no proved lexical link with Greek or Macedonian languages. The core of the Kanashi vocabulary consists of Tibetan and Hindi layers.

Language is also considered to be one of the secrets of the village and outsiders are not allowed to use it for communication. The two lower caste Julahas and Lohar families who have been staying in the village since the last five decades are not allowed to speak Kanashi.

Selected thematic list of words with Tibetan (Milchang) and Hindi correspondences

## Domestic animals

English	Kanashi	Tibetan (Milchang)	Hindi
cow	hooj, lang	lang	
dog	kute		kuttaa
goat	bokar	bakar	bakraa
horse	goda		goda
sheep	khaa	khas	

### Wild animals

elephant	hathi		hathi
fish	macch	machas	machli
monkey	bandrong	bandras	bandar
tiger	thaarh	tar	

### Colours

red	lal		laal
yellow	peegh	pik	
blue	ragh	rag	
black	rooko	reg	
white	chhog	thog	

### Parts of the body

eye	migh	mik	
hand	goodh	gud	
hair	krah	kra	
head	bal	bal	
skin	sha	sha	
tooth	gaarh	gar	

### Numerals

one	eed	it	
two	nish	nish	
three	shoom	sum	
four	pooh	pu, puk	
five	angah	nga	

six	cch		chah
seven	set		sath
eight	ath		ath
nine	nou		nau
ten	des		das

Kanashi preserved specific terms regarding

- Village judiciary,
- location
- architecture
- fauna and flora

Few samples can be seen below:

<b>Village Judiciary</b>	
<b>Kanashi</b>	<b>English</b>
hakkma	village council (upper court)
jarang	court
jeshta	elected member of village council
kardar	non-elected member of village council
<b>Location</b>	
dhara-bheda	lower Malana
sara-bheda	upper Malana
<b>Architecture</b>	
handula	fire place (in the center of the village)
bhoming	floor
gaiang	first floor
khudang	ground floor
pati	balcony
pittang	door
roshvat	roof

Fauna and flora	
chabarh	lizard
chora	herb used for better digestion
kadu	herb used in case of body pain
kelamch	herb used in case of cough
putish	herb used in case of stomach ache
ring	snake
tontidar	spider

## Education

There is one Government primary school manned by one teacher Sh. Roshan Lal a resident of Kulu. There are 100 children on roll in this school. The school building also houses an Ayurvedic dispensary, panchayat ghar and also a middle school. There is another middle school headed by Sh. Naresh Patiyal, a science teacher with Sh. Jagpal Shastri sanskrit teacher and Sh. Jog Raj Rana history teacher. The middle school was established in 1996. Although there are four teachers the number of students is only 13. Up to the primary school midday meals are provided. Girl students are provided free books. So far only two students in the village have managed to reach class 12.

## Ecological Heritage

The people of Malana are very conscious about preserving their ecological heritage. According to village rules, fixing nails on a tree is prohibited as that could damage the tree. Burning of fire is also prohibited in the forests of Malana. Only dry twigs and branches are permitted to be carried away from the forest. Similarly, hunting of wild animals is not allowed without the permission of the village council and is allowed only during specific periods of the year.

In case wild animals attack the herds of sheep and goats of the villagers the hunters are sent from the village to the pastures to kill them. And if a bear is killed, the hunter is rewarded but has to deposit the fur in the Bhandara of the Devta.

## Livelihood

The life of Malanese is not an easy one. Living in close proximity to nature, they have to face the extreme conditions of weather. Long winter months, snow avalanches, and some times the epidemics also encounter them. Their livelihood is based on farming and cattle rearing. Besides, they also collect herbs in the upper reaches which find good market. There are a few shops in the village, but these meet the requirements of the villagers. During winter villagers spend most of their time weaving the yarn on a loom. Generally a coarse cloth is woven from which outfits like coats and pajamas are made. Ladies make shawls with decorated geometrical patterns. The ladies wrap shawls in typical kulu fashion.

The villagers rear cattle, sheep and goat. During summer they take them to their summer house for grazing, as fodder is easily available. A number of such houses are located throughout the length and breadth of Malana valley. These houses are abandoned on the onset of winter and the villagers start

collecting fodder in their permanent houses for their cattle. The sheep and goats are given to the village shepherd who takes them down to Kulu, Bilaspur etc. for grazing. Kokia, villager from Malana has the largest number of sheep and goats. Villagers usually hand over the flock to him for grazing as he is the most trusted man.

Rajmah, honey, and potatoes of this region are also very famous. Maize and wheat are grown on rotation basis to have good yield.

## **Fairs and Festivals**

There are two important festivals celebrated in Malana. One called Badoh mela celebrated in August and the other called Fagdi mela in February. On these festive occasion people from nearby villages come to this place. Holy relics of Jamdagani 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 on the beats of the Nagara, Shahanai, Karnali and Narsingha.

## **Marriages**

Except the two major functions in the village there is not any custom or ritual to be followed. Marriage is a simple affair for Malanese and is performed around the Mela in the village. Marriages are performed at an early age mostly below fifteen. The function lasts for only one night. The day marriage is fixed, the bridegroom wearing a turban and the traditional attire along with his friends and relatives visits the bride's house where a feast is arranged for the guests. Not more than 30-40 people accompany him. Rice, chapatti, dal and meat are served. Meanwhile, the bride also gets dressed up in the traditional attire and is bedecked with jewellery. The girl's parents and relatives present gifts to the girl and bless her. Thereafter the bride alongwith the bridegroom prepares for the onward journey. According to the custom, the bridegroom is the first to leave alongwith baratis. He holds a mashal (torch) in his hand. Seeing this, the bride runs after him and ultimately lands in her in-laws, house. This is all about the marriage and the locals call it Rakshasi marriage. No ceremonies, no priest and no elaborate rituals. The only place in the outside world that malanese keep relations with is the village Rasol. Rasol worships the goddess Reneuka, the wife of Jamlu, and that is why girls from Malana can marry here. Malanese are allowed to marry inside the village. If they marry an outsider they may never be allowed to re-enter the village.

Divorce too is not uncommon is as simple as the marriage. In case of divorce, according to the law of the land, the boy has to arrange a separate house, the food etc. for the girl. Divorced women can remarry. The Malanese can keep one or more wives.

Similarly, there are not elaborate last rituals to be performed at the time of death. The dead body is wrapped in a coffin and taken to the cremation ground and consumed to flames on a pyre. One member of the village, the Hakim attends it besides the family members and the ashes are kept at the cremation ground only. The rituals of the deceased last for three days. A goat is sacrificed for the purification of the house. On the death of the husband, the widow can remarry but after a gap of one year.

## **Religious Beliefs**

The shrine of Renuka Devi is situated in lower Malana. The shrine with its intricate wood work is noteworthy for its architectural excellence. Horns of animals sacrificed in the temple complex are usually fixed on the façade of the temple. The original abode of Jamdagani Rishi is said to be at Baginda, 15 kms from Buntar. Another shrine of Jamdagani Rishi is at Tosh village, 6 kms from Pulga.

The village priest Bua Ram, who is the only person in the village to wear a white turban, can be recognized from a distance. His forefathers have been there since ages to take care of the village-shrine

and pass on the injunctions of the Jamlu Rishi to the villagers.

Bua Ram, the priest has a two-storied house, well decorated from outside and embellished with intricate wood carvings. His family members are to stay separately but they do visit him while providing food and other things to him. In the close vicinity of the priest's house is the abode of Jamdagni Rishi called Jamlu Rishi in the local dialect.

The post of the village priest is a hereditary one. Bua Ram has one son Bayi Ram and a daughter Suvari Devi. Bayi Ram has two sons Morsingh and Amarchand. The village is inhabited by Thakurs only except for two families belonging to the Julaha and Lohar castes. They don't belong to this place and came here as drummers. While untouchability prevails, there are separate dharmshalas in the village for the lower caste people coming to the place to attend the festivals and other occasions.

Jamlu is the most revered and is considered to be the king. His courtiers are elected and they collect funds for the following services for the upkeep and maintenance of the civic amenities :

1. Land revenue from the villagers of Malana.
2. From outsiders who graze their cattle in Malana.
3. Offering of devotees in cash and gold and silver horses.
4. From the offering of visitors.

The administration of Malana is based on religious faith and to maintain the faith the elected members select Bhandaris among the villagers who are assigned the following tasks :

1. To collect tax on land from the area, which falls under the jurisdiction of the village shrine.
2. To deposit land and other revenues in the shrine treasury.
3. To maintain the income and expenditure account.
4. To collect and deposit the offerings.
5. To arrange funds for functions and festivals and to organize them.
6. To hold symbols of Jamlu devata during the religious processions.

The three-storied building near the courtyard is meant for keeping food and other necessities for the pilgrims. According to the rule of the land, nobody must remain hungry in the village. The visitors or pilgrims can get food from this place. To maintain this store house four persons from the village are selected every year.

There is a separate bhandar for the God, which is adjacent to his abode. In this huge bhandar are kept the food grains besides the offerings made in cash and gold and silver horses.

## **Village Administration**

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 the 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 total elected members come to eight. Out of these eight, one person is elected as Pradhan (sarpanch) and the other is a upapradhan.

Goor regarded as the voice of village - god, can be any person from the village. Any person can become Goor, who is regarded the voice of the village god. He is said to be possessed by the spirit of the Jamlu devta. There can be one or more Goor in the village. Magdu, the Goor of the Malana died in 1985 and nobody has taken his place so far. The people of Malana attribute it to domination of evil forces in the village.

Once the Goor is identified, he is directed to wear a cap and keep long hair. On certain occasions the Goor dances in ecstasy and is possessed by the holy spirit of Jamlu Devta. On such occasions the Goor directs the villagers and also listens to their woes. Goor has an important position in the village Hakima and is always consulted before making any judgement.

## **Dispute Redressal**

The village judiciary system through primitive is novel in its own way and the decisions are unanimously taken by the lower court. The council of the lower court hears the case and accordingly delivers the judgment. The council members reach a consensus and the case then is referred to the higher court for the final verdict. This type of participatory courtship is rarely found in villages of India and in most of the cases taken up by the traditional panchayat the decision is the monopoly of the sarpanch who is hand in glove with the panchs. Some scholars on the basis of this participatory court procedure have traced the origin of Malana Hakima to the ancient Greece. The Hakima are not rigid in their decisions and sometime they do revise them in the interest of village after studying the pros and cons. There are a number of cases which are taken up by the village council, like theft, grabbing of land, eloping with another person's wife etc. etc. Police intervention is not allowed to take place, but if the accused wants to seek the help of police he has to pay a fine of Rs.1,000/- to the village council.

The Malanese Judiciary has its own way of administering justice. In most cases the guilty is fined. In case of theft the offender has to return the whole amount and pay a certain amount to the treasury. In case some one revolts against the administration and judiciary his property is attached and the person is not allowed to stay in the valley. In case of theft or misuse of the God's treasures, the stones are tied to culprit and he is pushed down the mountain slopes.

## **Epilogue**

The civilized modern world has a lot to learn from the Malanese. The way they settle their issues is a lesson to the urban elite. No law books, no clauses, no constitution, no lawyers, no policemen or police stations and yet the villagers live in mutual harmony, sharing their burden with each other. With basic minimum requirements, the Malanese over the centuries have learn to live in tune with nature. They may not have access to the luxuries of the modern world still once can see the glow of contentment on their innocent faces.

In fact an outsiders in Malana or any other village is an intruder. The village of Malana is like a well-knit family and it is but natural that nobody should interfere in their private affairs. If we really want to protect and preserve this heritage we should leave the affairs of the village in the hands of the Malanese. Only minimum interference to which they have unitedly shown restraint will help. They are happy to be part of benevolent nature. Malana with its unique life style, language and traditions has remained curiosity for the outsiders for the last four decades. Much has been written about it, but not in a proper perspective.

But how long can the unique identity of this land be maintained when the Malanese themselves are more or less succumbing to the evil of modernisation? There may be no roads in the village but the video parlours have made in roads in its sanctity. The dwellings too are changing and in fact, the village is going through a slow process of socio-cultural degradation and if this continues the day may not be far off when it will lose its unique identity.

