



Research Article

Bhunda Mahayagya: A Study of Sacred Religious Tradition, Rural Community and Cultural Life with Special Reference to the Satluj Valley of Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
Bhunda Mahayagya (<i>Bhūndhā Mahayajñā</i>), described in some historical accounts as <i>Narmedha Yajna</i>, is a distinctive ritual tradition of the western Himalayan cultural landscape of Himachal Pradesh. Beyond its widely recognized rope-sliding ceremony performed by the <i>Beda/Jedi</i>, Bhunda encompasses sacred beliefs, village-deity (<i>devta</i>) traditions, collective organization, customary social relations, and cultural memory. This study examines the tradition with particular reference to the Satluj Valley and adjoining Bushahr cultural region, including the traditional <i>Char Thehri</i> (Lalsa, Dansa, Shingla and Shneri) and <i>Panch Sthaan</i> (Nirmand, Nagar/Duttnagar, Nirth, Kao/Kamaksha and Mamel/Mamleshwar). The study examines the religious and traditional significance of the legend of Lord Parshurama in the cultural interpretation of Bhunda, its traditional periodicity, the specialized role of the <i>Beda/Jedi</i>, the material and symbolic nature of the sacred rope, and the structured participation of different sections of rural society. It explores the relationship of the Bhunda tradition with gender, age, customary social categories, agriculture, local trade, hospitality, and inter-village cooperation. Based on historical, ethnographic, cultural, and documentary sources, the paper argues that Bhunda yagya functions as a living rural cultural institution through which religious beliefs, social obligations, collective resources, ritual knowledge and regional identity are transmitted across generations.	▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 07-11-2024 ▪ Accepted: 27-12-2024 ▪ Published: 30-12-2024 ▪ IJCRM:3(6); 2024: 316-321 ▪ ©2024, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes How to Cite this Manuscript Chauhan M. Bhunda Mahayagya: A Study of Sacred Religious Tradition, Rural Community and Cultural Life with Special Reference to the Satluj Valley of Himachal Pradesh, India. International Journal of Contemporary Research in Multidisciplinary.2024; 3(6): 316-321.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural landscape of Himachal Pradesh is characterized by an intimate relationship between religion, village society, sacred geography, and local community institutions. In the rural Himalaya, temples and village deities (*devtas*) serve structural functions extending far beyond individual spiritual worship. They provide a foundational framework for collective rituals, community obligations, social relationships, and the transmission of localized traditions. Within this complex cultural matrix, the Bhunda Mahayagya (*Bhūndhā Mahayajñā*), described in some historical accounts as *Narmedha Yajna*, occupies a highly prominent and distinctive position.

Bhunda is very much significantly associated with the Satluj-Bushahr cultural region and the adjoining areas of present-day Shimla, Kullu, and Mandi districts of Himachal Pradesh. Nirmand, situated in the Outer Seraj region of District Kullu, is historically recognized as one of its preeminent and most active centers. Regional historical accounts closely associate the Parshurama cult with five principal seats known as the *Panch Sthaan* (Nirmand, Nirth, Nagar, Kao, and Mamel) and with four additional secondary locations identified as branches of the tradition, known as the *Char Thehri* at Shingla, Shaneri, Lalsa, and Dansa. *The Punjab States Gazetteer for the Simla Hill States*, published in 1911, records this precise geographical association, characterizing Bhunda as a periodic, cyclical ritual that historically spread through networks of Parshurama Brahmins. The tradition is most commonly recognized by outsiders through its central rope ceremony, during which a chosen individual from the *Beda* or *Jedi* community performs a high-risk descent down a specially prepared grass rope stretched across a valley or ravine. While early colonial historical descriptions frequently connected this rite with ancient sacrificial symbolism, subsequent records and contemporary practices demonstrate significant evolution, institutional adaptation, and variation in interpretation. Related literature and media accounts document the intricate organisation of the rope ceremony, the hereditary role of *Beda/Jelly* lineages, broad-based community participation, and the adaptation of the tradition to modern safety requirements through infrastructure such as safety nets, as demonstrated at the latest Bhunda yajna held at Bachhunch (Rohru) in 2005 and Deothi (Rampur Bushahr) in 2006.

Rather than treating the spectacular rope-sliding ceremony as an isolated phenomenon, this paper examines Bhunda Mahayagya as a living religious and rural cultural institution embedded in the

social life of the Satluj Valley, particularly the adjoining Bushahr cultural region of Himachal Pradesh. It analyses how the tradition brings together sacred beliefs, customary institutions, collective participation, social relationships, material resources and cultural practices, thereby sustaining community life and transmitting shared knowledge and identity across generations.

2. LORD PARSHURAMA'S LEGEND AND THE SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF BHUNDA

2.1 Lord Parshuram in Himalayan Tradition

Lord Parshuram holds a prominent place in the religious imagination and sacred geography of the western Himalaya. Local tradition holds that, after obeying his father's command to behead his mother, Devi Renuka, Lord Parshuram came to Nirmand carrying her headless body. Her remains are believed to have rested here until he received a divine boon for her revival, giving rise to the traditional association of Nirmand with *Nir-mund* ("without a head"). He is also believed to have prayed here to atone for *matri-hatya* (matricide) and eventually established his spiritual seat at Nirmand.

The ancient Parshurama temple at Nirmand preserves a distinctive three-headed *mohra/muhra* (sacred idol) of Parshurama. According to local religious tradition, its three faces represent *Kaal*, the fierce aspect associated with the destruction of injustice; *Kaam*, the serene aspect symbolizing control over desires; and the *Raam*, the central face embodying divine righteousness. Local oral accounts maintain that this *mohra/muhra* was gifted by some king or queen of Kashmir around 900 CE. The temple also preserves sacred artefacts, weapons, and ritual objects associated with the deity, which are traditionally brought out during major occasions such as the Bhunda. Although these traditions are rooted primarily in local religious and cultural memory, they remain important to the collective identity and sacred heritage of the Satluj Valley.

2.2 Panch Sthaan & Char Thehri

Within the local ritual hierarchy, five specific locations within the Satluj Valley are identified as the *Panch Sthaan*. These are recognized as the five primary centres or principal seats of the Lord Parshurama cult. These five principal nodes form an enduring cultural map that bridges different administrative districts across the Satluj Valley.

Table 1: Panch-Sthan (Five Principal Seats of Lord Parshurama)

Sr. No	Temple	Presiding Deity	District	Year of Latest Bhunda
1.	Nirmand	Devi Ambika and Parshurama	Kullu	1981
2.	Kao (Karsog)	Devi Kamaksha	Mandi	1650s
3.	Mamel (Karsog)	Mamleshwar Mahadev	Mandi	1780s
4.	Nagar/Duttnagar (Rampur)	Guru Dattatreya	Shimla	1936
5.	Nirath (Rampur)	Surya Narayan Devta	Shimla	1942

Complementing to the above five principal seats of the Lord Parshurama are the *Char Thehri*, recognized as four religious

locations within Bushahr region of the Shimla district. These *Char Thehri* villages represent sacred halting points associated

with the legendary journey of Lord Parshurama. As noted in the 1911 *Punjab States Gazetteer*, these villages served as secondary

branches from which the cyclical performance of the Bhunda tradition gradually disseminated.

Table 2: Char-Thehri (Four Sacred Places of Lord Parshurama)

Sr. No.	Temple	Temple	District	Year of Latest Bhunda
1.	Lalsa (Rampur)	Devta Dognu-Sharoch and Devi Mangla Kali	Shimla	1936
2.	Dansa (Rampur)	Devta Damukh (Deo Kaano)	Shimla	1990
3.	Shingla (Rampur)	Devta Narsingh and Devta Yagyeshwar	Shimla	1929
4.	Shaneri (Rampur)	Devta Khandeshwar and Devta Jaharu Naag	Shimla	No information

3. BHUNDA MAHAYAGYA: PERIODICITY, DURATION, AND RITUAL PROCESS

3.1 Periodicity and Preparation

Bhunda Mahayagya differs from ordinary annual village festivals through its prolonged and periodic character. Historical and ethnographic accounts associate major centres such as Nirmand with an approximate twelve-year cycle, although this should be understood as a traditional ideal rather than a rigid rule applicable to every deity institution. The timing is determined locally through the deity institution, *Gur* (oracle), *Pajeras* or priests, *Kardars*, and other functionaries, considering ritual indications, customary practices and community readiness. The observance extends well beyond the rope ceremony and may involve weeks of deity invitations, *yajnas*, processions, feasts and related rituals.

Preparation generally begins at least six months to a year in advance and involves local temple committees, village functionaries and the wider community. Major tasks include purification and preparation of the *yajna-shala*, consultation with affiliated sacred sites, invitations to neighbouring *devtas*, procurement of grain, ghee, funds and labour, arrangements for food and accommodation, preparation of sacred materials, and construction and testing of the rope system. Coordination with local administration may also form part of contemporary preparations.

3.2 Ritual Process and the Beda or Jedi

The *Gur* provides divine sanction and ritual direction, while

Pajeras and priests perform prescribed ceremonial duties. Deity processions, *yajna/havan*, music, community feasting and other observances culminate in the rope ceremony. The Beda or Jedi occupies a distinctive and highly specialized position in this ritual. Traditionally associated with hereditary lineages, the Beda or Jedi prepares the sacred rope and performs the rope descent. The role involves ritual discipline, observances and preparation and is understood within the community not as a secular physical performance but as a sacred responsibility associated with collective vows and well-being. The tradition continues to be associated with specialized families who have historically performed this distinctive ritual role.

3.3 Sacred Rope, Rope Ceremony and Modern Safety

The rope is traditionally prepared from *munj/munja* grass, combining specialised traditional knowledge with ritual discipline. It may extend across considerable distances over valleys or ravines, with a wooden sliding saddle (*ghodi or kathi*) used by the Beda during the descent. Thus, the rope has both material significance as an indigenous technical practice and symbolic significance within the ritual. Historically, the descent involved considerable physical danger. Modern communities have introduced safety adaptations without abandoning the ritual form. The use of heavy-duty safety nets during the latest Bhunda ceremonies at Bachhunch (2005) and Deothi (2006) provides a documented example of how the tradition has adapted to contemporary safety requirements while maintaining its ritual continuity.

Table 3. Principal Ritual Components of Bhunda

Ritual Component	Principal Significance
Deity consultation	Ritual sanction and determination of the occasion
<i>Yajna/Havan</i>	Sacred invocation and ritual purification
Deity arrival/procession	Inter-village religious and social connection
Beda/Jedi	Specialised ritual responsibility and symbolic fulfilment of collective vows
Munj rope	Sacred material object and traditional technical knowledge
Rope ceremony	Ritual culmination
Music and drums	Devotional and collective cultural expression
Community feast	Hospitality, resource sharing and social integration
Ritual closure	Completion of the ceremonial cycle

4. BHUNDA AND THE RURAL SOCIAL ORDER OF THE SATLUJ VALLEY

The organization of Bhunda festival reflects the institutional structure of rural society in the western Himalaya. It is not an

isolated religious act but a collectively governed process involving the local temple committees, the *Gur*, priests, village elders, traditional functionaries, households and occupational groups. Through an extended preparatory period, these

institutions mobilize financial resources, agricultural produce, labour, hospitality and ritual expertise. Different social groups participate through historically differentiated but interdependent roles. **Brahmins** traditionally preside over *yajna* and liturgical recitations; **Pajeras** and other attendants manage prescribed ceremonial functions and deity processions; **Thakur and Khashiya** (Rajput or the upper caste) lineages have historically been associated with patronage and ritual custodianship; **artisan groups** (lower caste community) contribute specialised construction and logistical labour; and **village elders** facilitate customary decision-making and consensus. **Khoonds** (traditional guardians of the deity) help maintain ritual discipline, regulate conduct and safeguard the sanctity of the ceremony. **Women** contribute substantially through preparation of ritual materials, community kitchens, hospitality, kinship networks, songs and cultural transmission, while **youth** provide labour and increasingly assist with coordination, communication and public management. Elders preserve oral and ritual knowledge, adults generally carry major administrative and financial responsibilities, and children acquire cultural knowledge through participation and observation. These roles should be understood in their historical and local context rather than assumed to represent uniform contemporary social relations. A particularly distinctive position is occupied by the **Beda/Jedi community**. Despite its historical association with the community positioned at the lowest end of the local caste hierarchy, the community performs the specialized preparation of the *munj* rope and the

rope descent. The associated discipline and ritual seclusion underscore the importance attached to the role. Following a successful descent, the Beda or Jedi may receive exceptional ritual honour, including symbolic elevation onto the deity's palanquin. This temporary ritual inversion of status demonstrates how Bhunda can simultaneously preserve and ritually renegotiate established social relationships.

Bhunda is also closely connected with the **agrarian and local economic life** of the valley. Households contribute grain, ghee, livestock-related resources, funds and labour, while the timing and scale of the ceremony are influenced by agricultural cycles and resource availability. Large gatherings may additionally stimulate local exchange in agricultural products, handicrafts, textiles, livestock and hospitality services. Community feeding and accommodation strengthen networks of reciprocity among households and visiting groups.

Viewed through a rural institutional lens, Bhunda operates as a mechanism of collective resource mobilisation, customary governance, and social capital formation. The deity institution provides the organizational centre, while differentiated roles foster interdependence among social groups through material contribution, participation, reciprocity, mutual trust, and collective responsibility. In this sense, Bhunda extends beyond collective religious observance to reinforce community relationships, social cohesion, and the continuity of rural institutional life.

Table 4. Social and Economic Dimensions of Bhunda

Dimension	Manifestation
Community resources	Contributions of funds, grain, ghee, labour and other materials
Social roles	Differentiated ritual and occupational responsibilities
Gender and age	Participation in food, hospitality, ritual, labour and cultural transmission
Beda/Jedi	Specialized rope preparation and ritual descent
Agriculture	Provision of food resources and connection with agrarian cycles
Trade	Local exchange of agricultural, artisanal and other goods
Hospitality	Collective accommodation and feeding of visitors
Deity institution	Ritual authority and organizational coordination
Social capital	Reciprocity, trust, cooperation and collective responsibility

5. BHUNDA AND THE CULTURAL LIFE OF THE SATLUJ VALLEY

5.1 Oral Tradition, Memory and Cultural Identity

Much of the specialized knowledge surrounding Bhunda, including narratives of Lord Parshuram, the history of *Char Thehri* and *Panch Sthaan*, ritual practices and genealogies of specialised lineages, is preserved through oral tradition and community memory. Although oral accounts cannot always be treated as independently verified historical evidence, they are important for understanding how communities construct and transmit their cultural past. Bhunda also functions as an important marker of **regional identity and belonging**. Its periodic occurrence encourages people living outside their ancestral villages to return, renew kinship and inter-village

relationships, and participate in local institutions. Through this process, cultural knowledge and community identity are transmitted across generations.

5.2 Music, Dance, Food and Hospitality

Traditional folk instruments such as *Dhol*, *Nagara*, *Karnal* and *Narsingha*, together with devotional songs, dances and processions, transform Bhunda into a collective cultural experience. The *bhandara* ((mass community kitchen) similarly extends the ritual into the social sphere by bringing residents, visiting kin and deity delegations together through shared food and hospitality. These practices reinforce social interaction while providing younger generations with experiential forms of cultural learning.

5.3 Cultural Identity and Belonging

In an era marked by rapid youth out-migration, urbanization, and sweeping socio-economic transitions, major periodic ceremonies like Bhunda act as vital cultural magnets. The rare, high-stakes occurrence of the Mahayagya motivates migrants residing in urban centers across India to return to their ancestral mountain villages to reconnect with local institutions. The festival systematically reinforces village solidarity, validates regional identity, updates inter-village relationships, and ensures generational continuity, functioning as a powerful cultural mechanism of belonging.

6. DOCUMENTED BHUNDA CENTRES IN THE BUSHAHR CULTURAL REGION

Historical and contemporary evidence shows that Bhunda has been observed at several centres within the wider Parshurama sacred geography, although its occurrence and periodicity vary across local deity institutions. The available records therefore do not indicate a uniform or continuous cycle at every centre associated with the *Char Thehri* and *Panch Sthaan*. The following table presents selected Bhunda centres in the Bushahr region of Shimla District for which specific locations, presiding deities, and years of the latest recorded celebrations are available.

Table 5: Some other locations in the Bushahr region of Shimla District where Bhunda Mahayagya is performed

Sr. No.	Temple	Presiding Deity	Year of Latest Bhunda
1.	Sholi (Nankhari)	Devta Palthaan	1981
2.	Kharahan (Nankhari)	Devta Jisher	1987
3.	Majheoli (Rampur)	Devta Laxmi Narayan	1991
4.	Basahra (Rampur)	Devta Chhabaki (Dutt-Maharaj)	1993
5.	Pujarli (Rohru)	Devta Maheshwar	1995
6.	Belu (Nankhari)	Devta Dramukh	2002
7.	Bachhunch (Rohru)	Devta Bondra	2005
8.	Deothi (Rampur)	Chhija-Kaleshwar Mahadev	2006

(Note: The table lists Bhunda locations other than those of the *Char Thehri* and *Panch Sthaan* discussed above.)

The latest documented Bhunda celebrations at Bachhunch (2005) and Deothi (2006) illustrate the tradition's continued practice and adaptation in the region. Field consultations and information shared by members of the respective temple committees indicate that upcoming Bhunda events are proposed or anticipated at Dalgaon (Rohru) and Lalsa (Rampur), reflecting the continuing institutional significance and periodic renewal of the tradition through local deity institutions and community participation.

7. CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATION, CHALLENGES, AND PRESERVATION

7.1 Tradition and Modern Safety

The use of safety nets at Bachhunch (2005) and Deothi (2006) demonstrates the tradition's ability to adapt to modern safety requirements while retaining its essential ritual structure and symbolic meaning. This illustrates that preserving living heritage does not require freezing traditional practices, but enabling them to evolve while maintaining their cultural significance.

7.2 Migration and Changing Rural Society

Out-migration for education, employment, and urban opportunities has altered the demographic structure of Himalayan villages and may weaken the intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge, oral traditions, and specialized crafts such as *munj* rope-making. At the same time, the periodic nature of Bhunda encourages migrants to return to their ancestral villages, reinforcing kinship, community relationships, and cultural belonging.

7.3 Commercialisation and Media Representation. Growing media and digital visibility provide opportunities for

documentation and preservation but may also reduce Bhunda to the spectacular rope descent. Contemporary Bhunda should therefore be understood within its broader religious, social, and symbolic context rather than through sensationalized representations. Historical references to sacrificial practices should likewise be distinguished from the forms and meanings of the contemporary ritual.

7.4 Strategic Preservation Measures

Long-term preservation requires community-centred documentation and institutional support. Key measures include maintaining temple archives and oral histories; digitally preserving manuscripts, *mohras*, artefacts, and photographs; supporting *Beda/Jedi* families along with other artisan groups and their specialized knowledge; Promoting the cultural significance of the *Char Thehri* and *Panch Sthaan* through documentation, public awareness, and responsible cultural tourism; engaging youth in cultural documentation; Developing standardized safety protocols for the rope ceremony and related infrastructure; promoting community-controlled cultural tourism; encouraging interdisciplinary research; and developing a Bhunda Cultural Atlas of the Satluj–Bushahr Region.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has certain limitations. Written documentation on Bhunda remains limited for several centres; therefore, some historical details draw on published sources and locally transmitted oral accounts, which may vary across communities. The study focuses primarily on selected centres of the Satluj–Bushahr cultural region and should not be considered representative of all related traditions across the western

Himalaya. Records of periodicity and forthcoming celebrations are also uneven across deity institutions.

Finally, the study is primarily qualitative and does not quantitatively assess the economic and other social impacts of Bhunda. Further interdisciplinary and field-based research could examine these dimensions through systematic surveys, ethnographic studies, and comparative analysis.

9. CONCLUSION

The Bhunda Mahayagya (*Bhūndhā Mahayajñā*) represents a distinctive living religious and rural cultural tradition of the Satluj–Bushahr region of Himachal Pradesh. Its significance extends beyond ritual observance to encompass sacred geography, community participation, customary institutions, social relationships, cultural memory and intergenerational transmission. The tradition demonstrates how rural communities sustain collective identity and social cohesion through shared beliefs, responsibilities, and cultural practices. At the same time, changing rural conditions, migration, media exposure and safety requirements are reshaping its contemporary expression. Its continued preservation therefore requires community participation, responsible documentation, intergenerational transmission, and appropriate institutional support while respecting its religious significance and local cultural ownership.

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