Godsland: Devbhumi

Humla is at the top left corner of Nepal. To its north is the Ngari province in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, and to its west is Uttarakhand, a state in India. The river Karnali originates in Tibet, flows through Humla, and travels south into India to join the river Ganga. Buddhists, Bönpos and Hindus live here. Great snowcapped peaks, beautiful grasslands and steep mountains are seen in Humla. Some people are farmers, and some are traders who have historically connected the plains of India to the Silk Route that passed through Tibet.

Humla is rich in stories. Every village has sacred spaces where ancestors and gods are worshipped. The Hindus of Humla worship the twelve gods, namely Rampal, Haripal, Ghantapal, Banpal, Madhumpal, Shankhapal, Kalshilta, Gura, Betal, Shuklahansa, Daarhe-Mashto and Dudhe-Mashto. Bhawani, who is their sister, is also worshipped. Others like Lauhasur, Lhango and Harki are nephews of the twelve brothers.

Each village in Humla has shrines for various gods. Big villages like Simikot or Thehe may have more gods than other villages with fewer gods. Each god or goddess is born in human form as a dbami shaman. Another person trains to become the interlocutor dangri, who speaks the ancient language of the gods. The dangri translates the prayers and
wishes of the people for the gods, who take their dhami into a trance and listen to prayers. The dangri also translates the speech of the gods for the people of Humla.

In the time of gods, before time had become real, the twelve gods heard about the creation of the Mount Kailas and the Lake Manasarovar. They asked their eldest brother Indra, who was the king of the heavens, for permission to visit the sacred pilgrimage sites. They bathed in the holy lake and walked around the holy mountain and sang praises of the Creator. But on the way home, they were captured by the demon of Dangechin. The gods fought the demon’s army for a thousand years before defeating him. They threw his head many kilometers away from his body. The soil around Taklakot in Tibet turned red from the demon’s blood.

The gods returned to Indra and said, ‘We have been hungry and thirsty for a thousand years. Give us food and drink!’

Indra replied, ‘Go to Humla. Protect my rule there by punishing evil and rewarding good deeds. So that the people may offer you sacrifices and a part of their harvest, bless them with children and cattle, or make them ill. When they pray to you and offer you food and drink, heal their diseases!’

This pleased the gods. They descended from heaven to Naumule, in Hilsa. After bathing in a holy spring with nine fountains, they danced into Humla to live in various villages. They danced and sang through their dhami and kept the law of Indra. In exchange, the people of Humla sang their praise, offered sacrifices and grains, and promised to be good.

A powerful king ruled over the empire of Jumla, which is to the south of Humla. He was the incarnation of Vishnu. He heard of the miracles being performed in Humla by the dhami, for which the people of Humla made offerings. The half-kilo of rice offered to dhami and dangri for making it possible to
talk to the gods also made the king angry because he believed that only a king could collect taxes and accept offerings.

The king became even angrier when he heard that the gods of Humla also rewarded good behavior and punished bad behavior, because justice could come only from the king. The gods made sure that men and women, and people of each caste, lived according to ancient rules. Everybody had a place in the hierarchy of society, which could never change, no matter what happened. As incarnations of the gods, the dhāmis enforced these rules.

So, the angry king of Jumla sent his fearsome soldiers to arrest the dhāmis of Humla and bring them to his court. Or, as the dhāmis of Humla say, Vishnu’s incarnation arrested the incarnation of the gods.

‘Who gave you permission to live among my people? Who gave you the right to take offerings from my subjects?’ the king growled at the dhāmis.

‘Our brother Indra sent us to Humla. He said we could rule over the people of Humla.’

When the dhāmis saw that the king was still angry, one of them took a fistful of barley and crushed it into black powder to show the power of the god who lived in his body.

But the king was also full of great power as the incarnation of Vishnu. He also crushed barley into black powder with his bare hand.

‘You dare challenge me with these simple tricks?’ the king roared in anger. He was proud, and he wanted the dhāmis to say that they were weak and worthless.

Another dhāmi took a fistful of barley and crushed it into red flour. The haughty king did the same. Next, the dhāmi crushed a fistful of sesame seeds until oil flowed from his fist. The king laughed and twirled his moustache, and he also made oil from sesame with his bare fist.
The *dhami* grabbed a rock and crushed it with divine power into dust, but the king also did the same.

‘Enough of these tricks!’ the king of Jumla shouted at the *dhamis* from Humla. ‘You will stop claiming that you are the voice of the gods! You don’t have any power that I don’t have. You will stop accepting offerings and dispensing justice!’

But the *dhamis* hadn’t finished showing their strength. They heated oil in a large copper pot. Once the oil boiled, a *dhami* drank the hot oil like it was water from an ice-cold lake. The king lifted the hot pot of oil, but he didn’t have the courage to drink it.

‘You do have powers greater than mine,’ the king finally accepted defeat. ‘You may rule in Humla as the voices of the gods. I am the incarnation of Vishnu. Therefore, I am your elder. So, you shall keep my laws in Humla. You shall reward good deeds and punish evil deeds according to my laws. You won’t allow anyone to commit adultery or theft, or to deceive anybody.’

‘You are the elder, and we are the younger,’ said the gods through the *dhamis*. ‘We shall reward and punish according to the ancient laws. We shall bathe in Manasarovar and pay our respects to Kailas by walking around the sacred mountains. We shall never accept anything that doesn’t belong to us.’

Forever since then, Jumla has been known as *Vishnubhumi*, where the king’s laws apply. Humla, where the *dhamis* uphold the rules of the gods, is known as *Devbhumi*, or, the land of gods.