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Rejection and Reaffirmation of Hierarchy in the Himalayas

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Acknowledgments

Abstract

In Himachal Pradesh, previously isolated villages, where the local secular and sacred authorities are intertwined, are being transformed by modernization and closer connection to the rest of the Indian subcontinent. Villagers in the small Pahari town of Seepur, outside of Mashobra, are detaching themselves from the localized *devta*, and looking towards the Hindu pantheon and "plains" practices to become connected to the "greater" Hindu tradition. This Sanskritization, as it is currently appearing in this region, undermines local hierarchy, which revolves around localized traditions and carefully regulated worship of the local deity. This shift in the focus of the villagers from the local to the Hindu "mainstream" may provide them with more freedom from the rigidity of local hierarchy, but the hierarchy of the traditional caste system prevails in the "greater" Hindu mainstream. The pitfalls of Sanskritization in this context include reinforcing all-India caste stratification through seeking legitimacy in the context of established caste, susceptibility to political-Hindu ideology promoted by the Hindu right, and the decline of unique local culture and traditions. A case study in the village of Seepur, named after their local Seep Devta, provides insight into the markers of this transformation, its engagement with Hindu mythology, tradition, and caste. The Seep Devta temple, with its current Sanskritization, acts as both a reaffirmation and a rejection of hierarchy, with the possibility of negative consequences to follow.

INTRODUCTION

The mountains of the state of Himachal Pradesh are home to a distinct Hindu culture of localized *devtas*, sacred cedar groves, and village hierarchies. Until recently, small Pahari mountain villages developed in isolation, building secular authority based on lineage, and sacred beliefs from deified ancestors or local deities. The sacred and secular remain deeply intertwined, and the local hierarchy in many of these villages is constructed as much around regulating access to the village temple as it is around administration of the village people. Accompanying modernization, and the loss of this characteristic isolation, villagers in the small Pahari town of Seepur, outside of Mashobra near Shimla, are detaching themselves from the localized *devta*, and looking towards the Hindu pantheon and "plains" practices to become connected to the "greater" Hindu tradition. This Sanskritization, as it is currently appearing in this region, undermines local hierarchy, which revolves around localized traditions and carefully regulated worship of the local deity. The village authority, prescribed according to lineage, lacks the flexibility necessary to adapt to this transformation. The pitfalls of this form of Sanskritization, which seems to be driven by the wish of villagers to connect more directly with Hindu practices and to escape the rigid regulation of worship controlled by local hierarchy, include reinforcing all-India caste stratification through seeking legitimacy in the context of established caste, susceptibility to political-Hindu ideology promoted by the Hindu right, and the decline of unique local culture and traditions. A case study in the village of Seepur, named after their local Seep Devta, provides insight into the markers of this transformation, its engagement with Hindu mythology, tradition, and caste. The Seep Devta temple, with its current Sanskritization, acts as both a reaffirmation and a rejection of caste hierarchy, with the possibility of negative consequences to follow.

INSULARITY AND CHANGE IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

The state of Himachal Pradesh, consisting largely of rugged Himalayan foothills and mountains, can be divided into three cultural zones.[1] The "Outer Fringe," bordering Punjab to the south and west, is greatly influenced by an immediate cultural exchange, with highly visible evidence of Punjabi culture on the bordering Himachal area. In the northeastern area lies the "Trans-Himalayan" region, bearing the marks of Tibetan Buddhist influence from bordering regions. The "Mid-Hills" region encompasses Shimla and the surrounding villages, a cultural zone traditionally sheltered from strong external influences. In this area, isolated, insular villages existed and remained largely unchanged for many generations. The isolation of these villages allowed for the development of localized traditions and hierarchies, and local temples worshipping local deities, still in evidence today in places such as the village of Seepur.

Until recent times, many small villages in the "Mid-Hills" region were entirely isolated; they existed as miniature, insular, subsistence economies, each comprised of the same essential elements. The culture that grew in these hills, referred to as the Pahari culture, was marked by a local focus centering on each community. A traditional village had four primary edifices—a fort palace, a temple, a marketplace, and a gathering place. Hierarchies within the villages, and village worship, illustrated the isolated nature of these villages; the hierarchies were defined centered around the primary edifices of the villages, and localized forms of Hindu worship appeared, prioritizing the village over the external surrounding subcontinent in both the secular and sacred lives of the villagers.

Within the past 20 years the geographical isolation of Himalayan hill villages has diminished rapidly. The data comparing this region's connectivity today to the time of India's

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[1] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

Independence in 1947 illustrates the enormous effect of modernization, which manifests in all aspects of economic, social, and religious village life.[2] The governable region of Himachal Pradesh province comprised approximately 20,000 square kilometers at the time of Independence, and today has grown to a vast 56,000 square kilometers. The construction of roads, the embodiment of an exchange of economy and ideology across regions, is an even clearer representation of this recent development: in 1947 there were fewer than 100 kilometers of usable roads throughout the region; today 37,000 kilometers of functioning roads cross the area. Even with this dramatic reduction in geographic isolation, there is still ample evidence of the narrowly localized secular and sacred traditions of this region, along with evidence that those traditions are facing change.

THE ROLE OF CASTE IN THE HIMALAYAN REGION

Caste and hierarchy in the Himalayas has taken a different form from "plains" caste order due in part to the historical isolation of Himalayan villages from the lower regions of the subcontinent. In *Hindus of the Himalayas,* Gerald Berreman takes observations from previous visitors to the region along with his own to assess the nature of hierarchy in the Mid-Hills in the late 1950s. According to Berreman, the area including Shimla revealed "a hierarchy of social status, though the rigidity of the caste system as in the plains does not exist. The upper class consists of Brahmins and Rajputs (Kshatriyas)…the lower strata is composed of innumerable social groups who form the artisan elements in the population of these parts…These suffer from a number of disabilities and are treated as serfs or dependents and thus provide a dual organization of economic classes in these hills."[3] Although current understandings of the

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[2] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.
[3] Gerald D. Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1963), 200.

complexity and ambiguity of caste across in India suggest that Berreman's reference to the "rigidity of the caste system . . . in the plains" is a misnomer, his observation that the hierarchy of hill villages differed, and continues to differ, from the *varna* caste system of "mainstream" Hinduism was valid.

Theoretical Origins of Caste

The origin of *varna* caste hierarchy is often credited to the ancient Vedic text, the *Rig Veda*, within the *Purushasukta*. The *Purushasukta* recounts the story of Purusha, a primeval giant from whose being the universe was constructed: it is a classical creation myth accompanied by the establishment of *varna* order. According to the text, "the four varnas emanate from the head, shoulders, thighs and feet respectively of Purusha, the First Man."[4] With the association of specific parts of the giant's body comes the assertion of social rank and duties, and "it is this principle of subordination of status to power that underlies the Vedic institution of varna, dividing society into four orders, Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (trader and agriculturist) and Shudra (menial)."[5] "Untouchable" or "Dalit" are terms used to indicate a class in society that is separate, and lesser, than the *varna* caste system. These individuals are theoretically involved with an occupation that is "polluting"—working with animal carcasses, tanning leather, removing human waste—and ironically, despite being "outside" the *varna* system, these "untouchables" are likely those most restricted by *varna* in society.

Concepts of purity and impurity govern the divisions of these *varna* castes. It is "the concept of pollution"[6] that underlies the creation of this hierarchy and prescribes relations among the castes: "The ideas of purity and impurity play a vital part not only in influencing the rank of a

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[4] M.N. Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 18, no. 2 (1984): 154.

[5] Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," 152.

[6] Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," 153.

caste and in the pattern of its relation with other castes, but in life-cycle crises and daily life."[7]

Purity is associated with Brahmanical priesthood, and the idealization of purity "influenced

strongly the direction which cultural and social history took in South India."[8] As Brahmins

established their authority, and superiority over others, particularity those "polluted" by

interactions with carcasses and waste, heretical sects such as Jainism and Buddhism, promoting

even more extensive ideals of purity such as *ahimsa* (non-killing), vegetarianism, and

renunciation, challenged Brahmanical supremacy, and influenced the notion of purity in

Hinduism. Apparently, "prior to the appearance of the Jain-Buddhist heresies, Brahmins ate

meat, including beef, and drank liquor. But after the Jain-Buddhist challenge Brahmins became

vegetarians and teetotalers."[9] Even though this supposed "classical" and ancient tenet of purity

in Brahmanical Hinduism actually has changed over centuries, today "purity" is often the excuse

for discriminatory measures against "untouchables" in society.

Misperceptions of Caste

The Vedic textual support for the ancient origin of *varna* has likely led to its perception

as "ranked endogamous divisions of society in which membership is hereditary and permanent"

(*Hindus of the Himalayas* 198). Western scholars seeking to understand the unique structure of

caste in Indian society have often described the phenomenon as inflexible and unambiguous,

with distinct markers and barriers between castes, having observed the stratified "degrees of

power and privilege" assigned to its members.[10] The immediate challenge to an image of caste as

unambiguous is the role of *jati*, which sociologist Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas observed as

early as the 1950s. The distinct, easily numbered *varna* are fragmented into innumerable

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[7] Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," 160.
[8] Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," 161.
[9] Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," 161.
[10] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 198.

classifications, according to profession, location, qualifiers that more closely account an individual's lineage and role in society. As Srinivas explains, "Jati…is a purely local system of ranked, hereditary and mainly endogamous, groups, each associated with one or more traditional occupations, and all interdependent."[11] It is evident "there is considerable ambiguity regarding the actual position of castes, particularly in the middle region of the order...In other words, the traditional caste system is far from being a rigid system."[12] Through a process of "Sanskritization," coined by Srinivas, lower *jatis* and members of lower castes have gained social status, through emulation of behavior characterizing the upper-caste. Thus, inflexibility and unambiguity are inaccurate descriptors of caste in society.

Caste and Colonization

Varna-legitimacy arguably reached its height during the era of colonization, due primarily to the colonizers' need to assert authority and a sense of understanding of the "ruled" masses. The notion of caste that existed in the Indian subcontinent many centuries before British rule was a fluid and variable set of ideals, assumptions, and practices relating to status and rank, that reflected the "subcontinent's remarkable diversity in culture and physical environment, and above all the diversity of its states and political systems."[13] Although, before the start of the colonial period, there was already a trend toward greater stratification and "ritualisation in social life,"[14] it seems clear that the British influence in India shaped the structure and enhanced the prevalence of the caste system to serve the needs of the British company and crown rule.

Caste Conflation: Brahmin and Kshatriya

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[11] Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," 154.

[12] Surendra Munshi, "Tribal Absorption and Sanskritisation in Hindu Society,"*Contributions to Indian Sociology* 13, no. 2 (1979): 298.

[13] Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 25.

[14] Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age,* 27.

Prior to the British regime in India, the foundations of caste society had been developed, but the higher castes, the scholarly Brahmins and the militaristic Kshatriya, worked together to promote ideals of self-rule, ritual, and warrior-ship. As far as *varna* order is mapped onto society, "while the Brahmin is superior to the Kshatriya, the Brahmin and Kshatriya together have dominion over the others, namely, the Vaishya and Shudra."[15] The characteristics of Brahmin as priestly and Kshatriya as warrior compliment each other in presenting an authority over the community in both the secular and the sacred. In considering the linear order of superiority in *varna*, Srinivas asserts, "even the relation between the Brahmin and the Kshatriya is not free from ambiguity…'in theory, power is ultimately subordinate to priesthood, whereas in fact priesthood submits to power.'"[16] The way in which Brahmins are actually believed to be the ultimate authority is dependent on each community: "In some areas, dominant castes are highly Sanskritised and show respect to Brahmins, whereas in others they are antagonistic to Brahmins and refuse to regard them as a higher caste."[17]

In describing the relationship between Brahmin and Kshatriya identities, Bayly places caste relations in historical context. Bayly describes a trend toward caste stratification in the rise of the "royal men of prowess," embodying ideals of the Kshatriya caste—powerful warrior-kings who came to prominence during a period of decentralization when regions of the Mughal empire were claiming independence and consolidating under these leaders. These rulers sought to legitimize their exercise of power by seeking the endorsement of men within the Brahmin caste, a group perceived to embody ideals of purity, restraint, and scholarliness, knowledgeable in the rituals of Vedic texts. Bayly describes this relationship as a "courtly synthesis between

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[15] Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," 154.
[16] Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," 159.
[17] Srinivas, "Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy," 160.

Kshatriya-like kings and Brahmans."[18] Yet Bayly recognizes significant variations in this model

from region to region, and over time: there were areas where the acetic Brahmins' role was to

provide pious practices giving a sacred aspect to a particular realm; other areas where the

Brahmins took on the more secular role of administrators and service providers; and others

where Brahmins themselves became more political than spiritual leaders, even taking on the role

of warriors; and some areas where these caste roles had no application.[19]

Thus, the identities of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas are at times so conflated that

members of the dominant castes merge, and individual authority in the sacred and the secular are

consolidated: The Kshatriya "royal men of prowess" were in a sense on a par with Brahmins,

recognizing a mutual symbiosis—there were aspects of each group that the other needed. These

groups were not concerned with their exact hierarchy, and oftentimes each adopted qualities

from the other. In contrast, the British, to serve their need to reinforce their power, legitimize

their authority, and maximize their profits, drew clear lines, particularly defining the Brahmin's

role and undermining the Kshatriya ideals. The "ruling" classes of both the pre-colonial and

colonial eras utilized the skills and the status of Brahmins in strikingly similar ways; like the

Kshatriya, the British Raj looked to Brahmin knowledge of tradition and ritual, and their status

as moral authorities, to give legitimacy to their rule. However, the Kshatriya ideals were seen as

a threat to British colonizers, and thus were smothered, replaced by more submissive and

manageable ideals of purity and passivity embodied by the Brahmins.

British Raj and Caste

From the start, the British East India Company sought demilitarization of the regions they

exploited. As Kshatriya-like rulers felt their powers dwindling, they came to rely more heavily

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[18] Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age,* 27.

[19] Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age,* 64.

on Brahmanical legitimacy and ritual to maintain the pretext of their right to rule. The British colonials then used members of the Brahmin caste in their role as spiritual leaders to lend advice and support to the Raj. Through the policies of the British colonials and their need for specific skills within the indigenous society, a more rigid set of boundaries and a promotion of Brahmanical qualities led to what is conventionally viewed as the "traditional" caste society in India. Brahmins found a role in colonial government as scribes, interpreters, and advisors on indigenous culture.[20] These Brahmins, seen as the authorities on Indian traditions and texts, were especially useful when British colonial leaders faced decisions that might impact traditional practices and stir up controversy; by discounting diverse local customs and claiming to rely on the oldest and purest sources of moral guidance as interpreted by the highest caste of indigenous people, the colonial government could centralize and shape law. Because the colonial government needed an indigenous voice of moral, social, and traditional legal authority to back its action, it looked to Brahmin scribes whose status the colonial government itself had helped to reinforce. The Brahmins who did not challenge this approach were promoted, and new importance was given to these "court pundits."

The Company Raj developed the "traditional" hierarchy of the caste system through the elevation of Brahmins, and through defining their exact roles within society. After the Mutiny of 1857, the Crown Raj created boundaries between the castes through social engineering, instituted through censuses in the 1860s through the 1880s. The use of subcontinent-wide censuses, in which residents were identified and distinguished by specific titles within local caste and religious categories, made the construct of caste a genuine social hierarchy throughout all the classes in society. "Depressed classes" and "Indian Muslims" categories were specified, leading

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[20] Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age,* 66.

some Muslims to claim they were not Indian, alienating themselves from the Hindu populace. All this further stratified society, and not only increased anger against the British rulers, but also created conflict among indigenous people through distinct alliances and boundaries.

The effect British had on the caste system was dramatic and stratifying. Their policies resulted in limiting mobility where it had existed before, diminishing the Kshatriya ideal with demilitarization and their displacement as rulers, and grouping indigenous society into more distinct caste-relevant roles. British feigned continuity with Indian customs by retaining ceremonial trappings of pre-colonial practices and using Brahmin pundits, whose positions of respect they reinforced, to provide scriptural justifications for their political behavior.[21] As Kakar describes in *Indian Identity,* modern Indian national identity and seemingly distinct boundaries between communities in the subcontinent are "not only a product of the colonial 'divide and rule' policies which led to the emergence of 'identity politics' but are also a consequence of the imposition of alien modes of thought on native Indian categories."[22] The extent to which social stratification manifests as inflexible and immobile, particularly for marginalized members of society comprising the "Other"—such as "untouchables," Christians, or Muslims—can be partially attributed to this mode of thinking used by colonizing forces to codify the colonized.

Caste in Modernity

Construction of an Indian national identity is still in process, and that process is accompanied by the redefinition of social boundaries and divisions. After India's long history of being conquered, years of colonization, and with its diverse population, at the time of Independence, prominent Indian nationalists tried to create an image of India as unified, efficient, and advanced, to justify self-rule. A significant struggle in India's quest for a national

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[21] Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age,* 27.
[22] Sudhir Kakar, *Indian Identity* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007), 328.

identity remains its perceived need to prove to itself the ability to have a strong, stable government, over a strong, unified nation. Indian nationalist discourse strives to present the nation as a cohesive, anciently-rooted, advanced, society. There are many seemingly mundane markers in society used to differentiate the "pure" from the "impure," low caste from high caste, the Hindu from the "Other," and that is an essential aspect of self-identity among members of Indian society. With the multiplicity of these social "signifiers" and the sheer size of the subcontinent, it is evident that "identities are not fixed and immutable but more or less variable."[23] There is a new Hindu identity "under construction" across India, exploited by political forces, that has been created out of a "preexisting ill defined, amorphous Hinduism" that has always been constructed in opposition to an "Other."[24] This creates an interesting paradox in present-day India, where this forming national identity is neither ancient nor modern, and is both "constructed and also revived."[25] The fact of the national identity in flux, with the multiplicity of jatis and social indicators in Indian society, reveals the complexity of caste hierarchy.

To those concerned with majoritarian politics, the insistence on Hindu assimilation, unity, and inclusion are as crucial as the exclusion of the "Other."[26] The Indian government challenged caste hierarchy in the National Constitution of India, abolishing the practice of untouchability, and has put in place legislation to promote the education and social mobility of *dalit* communities in the subcontinent. Despite this effort on the grand scale, discrimination still exists, and *varna* caste provides the context and rhetoric for continued conflict.

Caste in Sacred Space

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[23] Kakar, *Indian Identity*, 328.
[24] Kakar, *Indian Identity*, 328.
[25] Kakar, *Indian Identity*, 328.
[26] A.R. Vasavi, "Caste Indignities and Subjected Personhoods," *Economic and Political Weekly* (2006): 3768.

Caste politics in sacred space is as complex a topic as the practice of caste in Indian society. Hindu temples across India have been the setting for caste discrimination, where lower castes are seen to be "polluting" and without the proper authority to engage with the holy in a space considered pure and sacred. The importance of ritualism in the construction of *varna* caste order is especially relevant to caste politics in temples, and certain members of Brahmin lineage or members of higher castes who have taken priestly occupations, may seek to monopolize communication and contact with the divine within temples. Caste is not the sole factor at play in the context of hierarchy in temples—there are also localized hierarchies with established lineages passed down over generations, where *varna* caste is not the predominant measure of status. In isolated villages, engagement with caste through Sanskritization may act to reaffirm *varna* caste, through emulation of "legitimate" upper-caste behaviors.

Localized Hierarchy and Caste in the Himalayan Region

In Berreman's discussion of hierarchy in small Himalayan villages, he asserts that "the bases for status evaluation of castes, the barriers limiting contacts between them, and the nature of interaction among them are in general similar to those characteristic of the Hindu caste system throughout India…Legitimate individual mobility within the system is impossible."[27] A version of caste hierarchy within each village played an important role in determining status, profession, and access to spaces and resources. Today, observing immediate hierarchy and individual roles in the small village of Seepur in the Mid-Hills region, it is evident that specialized roles continue to be determined by lineage. This is illustrated by the "Raja" of the Koti region, encompassing Seepur, Anirudh Singh, whose family has held this title for thirty-nine generations.[28]

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[27] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 201.
[28] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

"Raja" Anirudh Singh, officially the current Rana Sahib of Koti (the title of "Raja" having been abolished with Independence, but still commonly used), is involved with politics beyond his status as a "royal." He has held elective office in the Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh since 2005. The Raja is a member of the Indian National Congress party, currently serving as a legislator for the Kasumpti (Himachal Pradesh) constituency. He recently won election with the slogan "we are not there to rule people, we are there to serve them."[29]

The Raja's lineage is essential to his role and political authority in the region. His family was originally Brahmin, but his ancestors for many generations have taken on the role of Rajputs. His ancestors left Rajasthan during the Mughal invasion, when, as Mr. Singh asserts, Rajputs were being converted forcibly to Muslims.[30] His ancestor, the only survivor when an ancient Raja of Kangra killed all the Brahmins in his region, was later given control of the princely state of Kutlehar as a formal apology by the Raja of Kangra, who also gave his daughter in marriage; this Brahmin thus became the 24th Raja of Kutlehar. His son was named Chand Pal, and he was the founder of the Koti state; the name "Chand" was taken as a clan surname, and identifies Anirudh Singh's ancestors as directly descended from the founder of the state of Koti, which exists now as a former princely state, for which Mr. Singh still holds the title, thirty-nine generations after it was established by his ancestor.

Even as a democratically elected regional representative, Mr. Singh's royal lineage carries weight. Commenting during Mr. Singh's most recent campaign, the press noted that "voters in the state admit that feudal systems still have deep roots in the remote corners and

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[29] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.
[30] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

interiors of the state, and the royalty does matter."[31] Completely apart from his elected position, the Raja plays a central role in the local leadership and governance of Seepur, purely determined by his lineage. Mr. Singh described the necessity of his role in the village, based on the inefficiency of a village with "two hundred or three hundred people with their own views"[32] trying to make decisions for the community. His role, he asserted, is to do the decision making "on behalf of the community and the god" and, while he is not above god, "there are 80 arts in a god, and the Raja has 84."[33] Those four extra "arts" refer to the notion of a social contract, wherein traditionally the role of Raja was almost contractual; according to Mr. Singh, the village people kept a Raja in power because he served their needs—the people were entitled to remove him. However, his community apparently has never exercised that option.

It is notable that, although he identifies his caste in ancestry as Brahmin, the Raja's secular role is viewed as part of the Rajput tradition in the Mid-Hills region. As Berreman observed fifty years ago, the "dominant" caste, most engaged with the secular structures of the villages, were Rajputs who took on the role of the classical "Kshatriya" caste in *varna* order. According to the greater Indian social tradition, Kshatriyas are a legitimate caste in *varna* order, still existing in "plains" India today. However, local legend in the Mid-Hills describes the extinction of the Kshatriya caste by a figure highly revered in the region—Parshuram. In Pahari tradition, Parshuram killed seven generations of Kshatriya, thus ensuring their annihilation across India. Despite traditional belief in the caste across India, people in these regions believe more strongly in their localized legend. Therefore, Rajputs have taken on the role of "warriors" in the hills, and the caste order of Kshatriya does not exist here. The power of local myth has

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[31] Sanjeev Chopra, "It's 'Raja' V/s 'Praja' in Himachal Assembly Polls," *Outlook India*, October 31, 2012, http://news.outlookindia.com/items.aspx?artid=779571

[32] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

[33] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

shaped social structure in Pahari tradition, and it is likely to maintain this shape regardless of widely held Hindu beliefs in the plains.[34]

LOCALIZED PRACTICES OF HINDUISM IN THE HIMALAYAS

Understanding the local roots of religious practices in the Mid-Hills region, and the changes in religious traditions as these Pahari communities move from isolation to modernization, can provide insight into the practice of Hinduism across the subcontinent. Berreman describes Himalayan village Hinduism as "the product of gradual change in an area of relative isolation where they have been out of direct contact with many of the influences important in shaping Hinduism on the plains."[35] The local practices of the hill towns may embody not only their distinctive heritage, but also a mixture of cultural influences reflecting their contact over time with both people of the higher Himalayan communities and people of the plains. In describing the localized practices of Hindus in the Himalayas there is a risk of demeaning the influence of localized Hinduism on the whole, simply by using terminology associated with localization: "Great Tradition" is used to describe "all-India Hinduism" and carries with it implications of literate, classical, Hindu practice "in orthodoxy" while "Little Tradition" implies a vernacular tradition, purely local. However, non-literate "Little Traditions" may involve practices that are spread, in many forms, across a vast geography. Noting that older studies had ranked localized forms of Hinduism as "lower" than "Sanskritic Hinduism," Vineeta Sinha has observed that recent studies provide a "more balanced account of everyday Hindu religiosity."[36] However, Sinha asserts that the term local or "folk" is associated with "ordinary" people or the "masses" which leads to connotations that still undermine these localized traditions

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[34] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

[35] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 139.

[36] Vineeta Sinha, "Problematizing Received Categories: Revisiting 'Folk Hinduism' and 'Sanskritization,'"*Current Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2006): 99.

against the foil of "Great" Hinduism. In assessing local practices of Hinduism, such as those of

Seepur, it is important not to undervalue these traditions, as they provide insight into the

complexity of modern shifts and transformations in religious practices, including Sanskritization.

The practice of Himalayan "rope sliding" provides an example of a "Little Tradition,"

perceived by many followers of the "Great Tradition" of Hinduism as deviant, which has been

transformed by interaction with the exterior. A *beda*, a member of a specified lower caste in

Mid-Hills village hierarchy dedicated to the worship of *Mahadev*, is chosen by a village shaman

to build and slide down a rope in a ceremony performed when villagers "have been experiencing

difficulties such as sickness or poor crops"[37] to please the deity *Mahadev* and ensure improved

harvest and health for the community. Historically, it is said the *beda* would often fall to his

death, or would even be killed by townspeople if he performed the ritual unsatisfactorily.

However, Berreman asserts, "the danger in rope sliding is greatly emphasized and probably

exaggerated in the folklore of the region,"[38] and it is thus a practice sensationalized to be "a

quaint, improbable, and fascinating performance…derived from a form of human sacrifice."[39]

Berreman analyzes rope sliding as "a Hindu ceremony well within the range of ceremonies found

in villages throughout India. That is, it is equivalent in function, meaning, and use to many

ceremonies of propitiation of deities in India," essentially, "a sub-regional expression of a pan-

Indian tradition."[40] Studying this practice, and others characteristic of the "Little Tradition,"

provides an important reflection on the nature of the spread of religious practices, similarities

between isolated traditions of Hinduism and the "orthodox," and the way in which "Hinduism

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[37] Gerald D. Berreman, "Himalayan Rope Sliding and Village Hinduism: An Analysis,"*Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 17, no. 4 (1961): 327.
[38] Berreman, "Himalayan Rope Sliding and Village Hinduism: An Analysis," 330.
[39] Berreman, "Himalayan Rope Sliding and Village Hinduism: An Analysis," 326.
[40] Berreman, "Himalayan Rope Sliding and Village Hinduism: An Analysis," 339.

and Indian civilization are characterized as much by their non-literate traditions as by their

literate traditions."[41] Understanding the value of Himalayan Hinduism can ensure that it "will be

seen as a regional variant of the all-Indian and North Indian Hindu traditions rather than, as has

often been asserted, a peculiarly deviant, degraded, or attenuated form of Hinduism or even a

non-Hindu "tribal" religion."[42] An appreciation for sub-regional expressions of Hinduism is

essential to a true understanding of the nature of Hinduism in practice across the subcontinent.

The Significance of Hindu Mythology in the Hills

Among the distinctive practices and traditions of the Seepur area are the worship of

devtas, localized forms of Shiv and Shakti Hindu deities, and even the deification of powerful

men in their lifetimes, including some of the current "Raja's" ancestors. Distinctive local

mythologies and legends surround such deifications and provide justifications for beliefs,

practices, and phenomena, such as the explanation for the absence of the Kshatriya caste

discussed above. With the practice of deifying localized *devtas* and individuals, rivalries between

neighboring villages often emerged. A typical legend that embodies a rivalry between villages

outside Shimla centers on the assertion of the sanctity and power of a village's *devta.* This myth

recounts a time when Seepur's central deity, Seep Devta, went on pilgrimage, and villagers from

the other side of the valley visited the sacred grove of Seep Devta and stole one of his sacred

cedar trees. The stolen tree allegedly can still be seen in the neighboring village, where it grows

"upside down," with multiple trunks that look like tree roots in the air instead of the

characteristic single straight trunk of most cedars. It is said that when Seep Devta saw the stolen

cedar, he rained down a hail of iron balls on the offending village. This myth accounts for a

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[41] Berreman, "Himalayan Rope Sliding and Village Hinduism: An Analysis," 339.
[42] Berreman, "Himalayan Rope Sliding and Village Hinduism: An Analysis," 339.

distinct natural phenomenon: the hill on the other side of the valley even today has a pocked appearance.[43] Myths grounded in phenomena visible in the present have an added sense of validity, and provide continuity so that even a petty rivalry as portrayed in antiquity continues through the present; today, there is never intermarriage between members of these two villages. Without any caste disparities or other significant social inequalities, mythology supporting the localized traditions accounts for social norms and practices that have been upheld for centuries.

Myth is essential in reaffirming or challenging caste on an individual level and in the greater community. The colloquial form of myths—stereotypes—establish certain characteristics of castes and jatis in society, supported by the texts that establish the supposed legitimacy of hierarchy: "Stereotypes tend to justify the system and perpetuate it. The members of various castes are often said to be suited to that caste and no other by their very nature. To give advantages to low castes would be useless, as they would not be able to make use of them."[44] This is a local as well as a pan-Indian phenomenon, where characteristics of members of society are said to have enabled them to best fulfill their designated roles. Berreman observed in his associations with village Himalaya the omnipresence of these sorts of "common understandings," used to legitimize the inflexibility of the established village hierarchy.

Mythology can also be called upon to "take away some of the sting of the negative associations of low status, usually by providing respectable ancestry for the caste and explaining its decline in terms of unfortunate circumstances."[45] This phenomenon Wendy O'Flaherty describes as "the myth of the fall"[46] where lower castes conceive of themselves as "fallen

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[43] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.
[44] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 220.
[45] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 221.
[46] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "The Origin of Heresy in Hindu Mythology," *History of Religions* 10, no. 4 (1971): 282.

Brahmins" for the sake of caste mobility. This manifests paradoxically in the practice of castes, where "according to the concept of dharma (here definable as inherent duty), every member of every caste group is enjoined to behave according to the hereditary station of the caste in the hierarchy. This is an explicit injunction against social mobility in the context of the caste system. At the same time there is upward mobility among low castes in India."[47] The individual, inspired by the concept of the "myth of the fall" and "natural" tendencies towards upward mobility, is apt to believe that he himself was once destined for higher status; "he aspires to live as a member of his 'true' caste in order to fulfill his true dharma. Therefore his mobility aspirations are legitimized and even made imperative. He rationalizes his own mobility aspirations without challenging the system."[48] Mythology in caste, specifically in the nature of *dharma*, duties in the present and rights from the past, can be used both to legitimize established hierarchy, and to legitimize individual aspirations of social mobility. The inherent paradox of this is mirrored in present manifestations of Sanskritization, visible in the current transformation of Seepur.

THE TEMPLE OF SEEPUR: A Case Study of A Localized Temple

A wooden sign marks the passage from the town of Mashobra into the village of Seepur. Significantly, the recently hand-painted sign indicates the village by two titles: "Seepur" and "Shivpur." What follows is a narrow unpaved road leading down the hill into a grove of cedar trees and a field. This grove is sacred, and those who enter are encouraged to dust off their clothing before leaving so as not to take anything sacred, and thus belonging to the local deity, with them. The sacred grove surrounds a small cedar-wood temple; noticeably absent are visitors and worshippers to the temple. Across the grove, local boys loudly play a game of Cricket and gather spectators over the course of the afternoon.

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[47] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 223.
[48] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 224.

The presence of the cedar grove has made a significant contribution to both the construction and sanctity of the temple itself. Cedar is a strong wood, standing straight and tall; it is excellent building wood. This variety of cedar is one of four "true cedars," and the only variety found in the Himalayas; the trees are known as "Deodars" derived from the words "*dev*" and "*dar*," together meaning "wood of the gods."[49] The trees' most noticeable feature is their drooping branches, and this sacred grove is said to belong to the *devta* to whom the temple is dedicated, "Seep Devta." The temple, as is typical of village temples in the region, is accompanied by other buildings—a *Serai* as a place for visitors to stay, a *Bhandar* to house musical instruments and other tools of worship.[50] The temple has existed in its current location for centuries, but has often been rebuilt; this version of the Seep Temple is approximately one century old. Seep Devta, speaking through a human mouthpiece known as the "*Deva*,"[51] informs the community when the temple should be rebuilt, and in which manner.

The pent-roofed style temple with a ridge-beam at its peak resembles a "gabled mushroom."[52] The temple's cedar beams, positioned only horizontally, are unique to this style of temple architecture.[53] Gaps in the wood are filled with stone planks, piled horizontally to fill the space. The foundations of the temple are several feet deep in the ground, resting on secure bedrock. Offerings of metal coins, nailed to the sides of the temple as an act of worship, have been painted and were likely attached many years ago. From the base of the temple there are external wooden stairs, leading to a trapdoor for access to the second floor—the home of the deity when he is visiting the temple. Wood "tassels" that move with the wind border the edge of

[49] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

[50] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

[51] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

[52] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

[53] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

the second floor under the roof. The roof is constructed from fine slate panels, and its pent-

roofed shape is characterized by a slight slant from the base, topped with a sharply pointed peak.

The ridge-beam, resting on the peak of the roof, is a single cedar log. The log is highly revered—

once it is cut, it cannot touch the ground and is carried by worshippers constantly until it is

placed. Traditionally, worshippers use their bare feet to hammer nails into the beam,[54] before it

is raised to the peak of the temple.

There are carvings of tigers and beasts near the base of the temple to protect the sacred

space, as well as deified human figures on corners of the temple, acting as guardians. The

carvings on the sides of the temple are an interesting addition to the space. These carvings are

typical folk carvings, and almost every panel has been carved by a different artist.[55] More than a

simple act of reverential art, these carvings date the construction of the temple; though they lack

detail—cedar splinters if the carvers attempt anything more than basic figures—they vividly

illustrate the social situation during the temple's reconstruction. Along with emblematic images

typical of Hindu sacred spaces—peacocks and elephants—there is a panel depicting figures of

colonials on a hunt, and another showing soldiers in procession.

The Roles Accompanying the Temple

The insular community of Seepur, like other small Himalayan villages, uses a specific

vocabulary and series of titles accompanying the practice of worship of localized deities in the

village temple. Raja Anirudh Singh's description of the roles of those involved with the temple

indicated a hierarchy embedded in Seepur village life for generations. The Raja highlighted the

exclusive nature of the temple hierarchy, emphasizing that not every worshipper could enter the

temple, and those involved with the temple had to have the correct ancestry, their identity

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[54] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.
[55] Raaja Bhasin, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

grounded in an established lineage.[56] His listed his own self-proclaimed role of "chief minister"

at the top of the implicitly sacred temple hierarchy despite his clear emphasis on the secular

nature of his position in the community. The Raja characterized his role as chairman of the

temple "management committee," establishing his authority across the sacred and secular.[57]

Next on the Raja's list of the temple hierarchy was the "*Pujari*" with Brahmin status, who leads

worship and has authority to enter the temple. The "*Bhandari*" is the temple's treasurer, keeping

records of offerings, especially cash offerings, dedicated to the temple. Musical instruments and

other necessary items for worship belong to the "*Sena*." The "*Deva*" has a distinct role, a

localized "soothsayer" who acts as a mouthpiece for the *devta*, at times entering into a trance to

communicate between deity and devotees.[58]

       The current *Bhandari* of the Seep Temple, Niran Singh Bhandari, his position established

in his surname, collects and manages money and offerings for the temple, and sits on the

management committee, of which the Raja is the chairman. Like the Raja, the *Bhandari's*

position is based on lineage, but his is one of twenty households that share the appropriate

ancestry and status to carry the position.[59] The position is elected, with a new *Bhandari* every

three to five years. Ultimately, despite the "election," the new *Bhandari* is given authority by the

Raja, at which point the former *Bhandari* will "pass his cap" to his successor.[60] The *Bhandari*

also described the role of the Brahmin *Pujari*, giving a clearer picture of his significance. The

Pujari is the only member of the hierarchy who is able to enter the temple whenever he wishes,

and he and his family will eat the wheat and corn offerings given to the *devta* during worship.

[56] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

[57] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

[58] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

[59] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

[60] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

The family of the *Pujari* may aid in maintenance of the temple and he oversees all temple repairs. The *Bhandari* emphasized the exclusivity of access to the temple, the importance of lineage, and the various aspects of secular and sacred that the Raja and the *Pujari* manage.

The Temple Deity

The precise nature of the local "Seep Devta" differs depending on who is describing the deity. The Raja described Seep Devta as a "manifestation of Shiv" but blanched at the notion of the two being the same.[61] The *Bhandari* first asserted that "Shiv" was the deity being worshipped there.[62] The idol or bust of the deity is made with "the eight primary metals" imbuing it with efficacy, and the prayers make it come to life.[63] According to the *Bhandari*, Seep Devta is a local variety of a central figure of the "greater" Hindu pantheon—Shiva. Approximately 7,000 villagers live in the former state of Koti and, as was explained by the *Bhandari*, they worship this localized deity; other localized forms of the deity exist in other villages across the hills. The Seep Devta is worshipped with special mantras and prayers, separate from the "Great Tradition" worship of Shiva. Shiv manifested as Seep only once the Raja's ancestors arrived in Koti from Rajasthan, bringing with them an idol of Shiv and of Parvati.[64] Shiv appeared as Seep to the ancestors when they entered the region, and, ever since that moment, they ensure the continuity of the local *devta* by requiring the community worship Seep together. Villagers worship Seep separately from Shiva, but consider them the same deity appearing in separate locations. Villagers belonging to the region of Koti are required to worship and believe in Seep, but if they leave the village they are likely to worship Seep as Shiva.[65]

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[61] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.
[62] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.
[63] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.
[64] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.
[65] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

Practices Surrounding the Temple and Worship

The idol of the Seep Devta stays permanently a few villages away, in the *Deothi* temple, but goes on a *yatra* to visit area temples; a palanquin used for carrying the *devta* on *yatra* is hidden behind the temple in pieces, and can be easily constructed for the *devta's* visit. Before carrying the deity on *yatra* the worshippers must be "pure" for fourteen days without wine, meat, or sexual intercourse.[66] On the second Sunday of May, the *devta* visits the temple in Seepur, and a festival called "Seepur Mela" begins, characterized by years of tradition.

Seep Devta has equal periods of rest and activity every year; the deity is considered "resting" from June or July to around Diwali in November, and he is "awake" from after Diwali until June or July.[67] The day where the *devta* "wakes" each year is named "*Deothan*" derived from "Dev-uta"—"to wake up." The opposing holiday, when he returns to his sleep, is titled "*Devshaini*" and he rests in his *Deothi* for those months. All good works associated with the temple and the *devta* are performed while the *devta* is active; typical offerings are grain, corn, money, and wheat. On *Deothan* and *Devshaini*, all villagers must attend, or at the very least one member from every household. These holidays are "official" and "officiated" by those given authority in the established village hierarchy. Within the homes, on these two sacred days, no one may sit on a high chair, or sleep on a cushion. Families must physically lower themselves in reverence of Seep Devta, sitting on the ground, and sleeping on the floor. On these two days, the Raja may enter the temple with the *Pujari*, however no other worshipper may enter.[68]

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[66] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

[67] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

[68] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

Every month, there is an official worship of the village deities on the day of the "*sankrant*"—determined by the moon.[69] Attendance every month is not required of villagers, but on this day they are given the opportunity to worship the village deity at the sacred site. Again, the worship is "officiated" and is a community activity, with emphasis on the village rather than individual worship and communication with the deity.

Personal Temples

With the exclusive and official nature of worship associated with the local *devtas* in Seepur, there exists also a secondary form of worship—through personal temples. These personal temples located in households honor members of the Hindu pantheon of deities. Seep Devta is explicitly prohibited from being worshipped in this manner; while Seep cannot be represented in a personal temple, Shiv can be depicted.[70] *Dhom*, a lesser local *devta*, may be depicted in a personal temple, but he must be placed in the highest possible position in the temple, if he is to appear at all.[71]

The Role of Brahmins and Rajputs in the Hills—the Pujari and the Raja

The "ambiguity" Srinivas and Bayly noted in the conflation of the identities of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya in *varna* caste order across India also exists in the roles of the *Pujari* and the Raja in the previous isolation of the Himalayas. In the traditional Mid-Hills village structure, the essential edifices of fort palace and temple were sometimes attached—those granted access to one likely granted access to the other. Berreman, in his assessment of Himalayan villages, established that Brahmins and Rajputs are "allied castes" who act together[72] to legitimize and reassert the authority of each other in the sacred and the secular workings of

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[69] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.
[70] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.
[71] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.
[72] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 208.

village life. This monopoly over both aspects of village life arguably manifests more strongly in the singular roles of *Pujari* and *Raja* which establishes a more immediate and inflexible hierarchy, determined through lineage.

The *Pujari* as described by both the *Bhandari* and the Raja, has Brahmin distinction and has highest access to the temple and authority over practices of worship. However, the Raja, beyond control of the secular administration of the village, is "chairman" of a "management committee" dedicated solely to the temple itself.[73] The Raja has the power to elect members of the committee, but cannot physically enter the temple except on the two official holidays honoring Seep Devta.[74] On those days, while the villagers prostrate themselves to acknowledge superior authority, the Raja is placed in a higher position of access engaging with the temple. Similarly, although the *Pujari* has no apparent direct authority over purely secular matters of the village, the entire authority of this village is attached to the worship of the Seep Devta. From the exclusive nature of all worship of the regional deity, a clear hierarchy is established, and it is maintained through the strict regulation of the manner in which villagers worship Seep Devta on the ordained holidays, separate the village *devtas* from the Hindu pantheon portrayed in their homes, and, most importantly, maintain a clear distinction between Seep Devta and Shiv.

THE COMPLEXITY OF SANSKRITIZATION

Sanskritization, as coined by M.N. Srinivas in his work *Religion and Society Amongst the Coorgs of South India*, refers to a process of social mobility among *jatis* or *varna* castes, allowing them to establish a higher position on the great spectrum of ritualized purity and impurity. "A caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short,

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[73] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.
[74] Niran Singh Bhandari (*bhandari*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Seepur, 7 April 2013.

it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and adoption of

the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically

forbidden."[75] The emulation of higher caste behaviors established legitimacy within the system

itself, according to established practices that reinforced certain members of society as

maintaining the beacon of superiority: "Srinivas has emphasised that the mobility associated with

Sanskritisation results only in positional changes in the system and does not lead to any

structural change. A caste may move up or down but all this takes place in 'an essentially stable

hierarchical order'(1966: 7)…He is obviously referring to the varna order."[76] This practice

reflects what may be interpreted as a common, human belief—"Who does not crave to be

honoured by those who are held in honour… the easiest device is clearly to imitate those held in

honour."[77] The essential characteristics of this classical definition of Sanskritization are

emulation of the higher-class behavior leading to mobility within the pre-constructed system of

an entire class of individuals together.

Sanskritization of the "Hills" People Towards the "Plains"

As expected with the modernization of the subcontinent, "with improved means of

communication, increased movement of people between the hills and plains, more easily

available schooling, and increased financial capabilities" a specific form of Sanskritization

emerged, "an active tendency toward emulation" of the greater Indian community by small

villages in the hills.[78] The initial layer of the process of Sanskritization among village people in

the Himalayas was with the specific goal of "plainsward mobility"—"the trend toward adoption

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[75] M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 32.

[76] Surendra Munshi, "Tribal Absorption and Sanskritisation in Hindu Society,"*Contributions to Indian Sociology* 13, no. 2 (1979): 303.

[77] Nirmal Kumar Bose, *The Structure of Hindu Society*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1975), 94.

[78] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 139.

of the behaviors of plains dwellers. The goal of many hill people is to be acceptable or respected in the eyes of plains people with whom they are increasingly in contact."[79] This form of Sanskritization manifested in the practice of rope sliding, adapting it to be acceptable by "plains" standards, and "giving up (at least before outsiders) things that are reprehensible by plains standards and also things which are merely distinctive of hill people."[80] This transformation, a consequence of interactions with other regions of the subcontinent, is described by Berreman as "the dominant trend," "a society-wide movement toward what is viewed as the religious context of the plains in order to win the respect of members of that dominant group" (*Hindus of the Himalayas* 142).[81] The extent to which this transformation occurs reflects the level of interaction between the village and the plains, and it occurred to various degrees across many villages, as access increased between the hills and plains.

Sanskritization of Those in Authority/The Higher Classes

In this form, "plainsward mobility" Sanskritization is most evident in the upper-class hills people, emulating the upper-class of the plains. Despite their pre-determined position of authority in their own Mid-Hills villages, "Plains Brahmins and Rajputs often reject the caste status claims of their Pahari caste-fellows, largely because of their unorthodoxy. By adopting some of the symbols of plains culture, Paharis hope to improve their status in the eyes of the plains people."[82] At the time when Berreman studied the social trends of the beginnings of modernization in these hill villages, he determined that "higher castes in this case have not yet felt threatened by the Sanskritization of the lower castes—the immediate hierarchy in the village

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[79] Berreman, "Himalayan Rope Sliding and Village Hinduism: An Analysis," 338.

[80] Berreman, "Himalayan Rope Sliding and Village Hinduism: An Analysis," 338.

[81] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 142.

[82] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 139.

retains its original shape."[83] In fact, he envisioned Sanskritization within these villages as a tool of those already in power: "The most important factor in 'class' or status within the caste besides wealth and the things correlated with it, is Sanskritization. The more a family conforms to Sanskritic orthodoxy in life-cycle ceremonies, the more highly it is thought of."[84] This Sanskritization enabled the authority in these villages to be seen as legitimate from the outside, without any challenge to internal hierarchy. The transformation was in the hands of those members of society legitimized through the local hierarchy, to have their own authority legitimized by a hierarchy endorsed by the rest of the Indian community.

The current Raja of Seepur, Anirudh Singh, provided evidence of this form of high-caste Pahari Sanskritization when he discussed the nature of Seepur's local deity, Seep Devta. The Raja was eager to legitimize the Seep Devta by acknowledging the deity as a "manifestation of Shiv."[85] Granting this connection between the two deities allowed for Shiva's established efficacy and legitimacy within the greater Hindu pantheon to be confirmed in the figure of Seep, with a clear distinction between the two. This distinction, the notion of a central Hindu deity's power vested in a local deity unique to this region of the Mid-Hills, and with a special connection to the Raja's ancestors, is the crux of the Raja's image of Seep Devta—powerful and legitimate, yet distinct in form, location, and purpose from the mainstream Hindu deity Shiva.

Sanskritization of the Village Peoples

A newer manifestation of Sanskritization in the Mid-Hills region, still in progress at this moment, is of a distinctly different nature. The "plainsward mobility" that gave authority to the village leaders is no longer the primary force behind the transformation of the village of Seepur.

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[83] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 141.
[84] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 219.
[85] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

Today, the villagers in Seepur, not their leaders, are undeniably looking to constructs and practices of the greater Indian community, and as their beliefs and religious practices transform, the village community transforms simultaneously.

Personal temples in the villagers' homes reflect the limitations inherent in the exclusive nature of the localized structure attached to the sacred in Seepur. The prohibition of portrayals of the preeminent local deity in their homes, along with the fact that these villagers are not granted access to the sacred spaces allocated to their local *devtas*, and the highly formalized biannual community worship of the local *devtas*, generates a separation between the locals and their local deities—the mere fact that their deity is "local" does not provide the villagers any special connection with this manifestation of the sacred. In practice, daily worship in personal temples is dedicated to the broader pantheon of the "Great Tradition" of Hinduism, keeping villagers more connected to these seemingly distant deities over their local forms. The pride vested in local deities comes not from the village people themselves, but from those at the top of the village hierarchy who would have the most to lose if distinctions between the localized tradition and the all-India Hindu tradition were lost.

In seeking to emulate the practices and beliefs of people across the subcontinent, illustrated in their appropriation of Hindu "orthodoxy," the villagers effectively undermine the immediate, established form of hierarchy within the village. As the focus of the villagers' worship shifts toward Shiva, the significance of Seep Devta as a separate and predominant subject of veneration diminishes, and the power and even the relevance of the hierarchy built around Seep Devta similarly diminishes. As the authority of the "Raja" and those vested with authority in the temple extends across boundaries of sacred and secular, so the Sanskritization of

religious beliefs in the village manifests in the structure of the community, likely undermining the secular as well as the sacred power of the lineage-based hierarchy.

There is written proof of this Sanskritization at both the Seepur Temple and the nearby *Deothi* temple. Painted mantras placed in front of the temples are dedicated to "Shiv," and the deity being worshipped at the Seepur Temple is indicated in Devanagari script as both "Seep" and "Shiv." Upon entering the town, visitors are greeted by a sign that indicates that "Seepur" is also known as "Shivpur." It is evident in the current establishment of "Shivpur" as a legitimate title for the village, until recently known only as "Seepur," that a shift in the prominent deity is occurring simultaneously. The fact that the name of the village, having once been so entirely attached to this local deity, is undergoing a transformation indicates the strength of this reform among the villagers. The honorific title of their hometown is shifting identities from the local *devta* to its more accessible form—more accessible for those both outside and inside the boundaries of the village itself.

When confronted about the existence of this form of Sanskritization in Seepur, the Raja at first adamantly denied that the transformation is occurring. He appeared frustrated and argued that local Seep Devta, and the localized tradition, maintains its pure form in the village of Seepur still today. After hearing the way in which local signs indicated this change, he acquiesced slightly; however, he described those calling the deity "Shiv," and the town "Shivpur" as "misinformed" due to "lack of knowledge" of "common people."[86] He quickly moved to a discussion of the current era of the Hindu calendar—the "period of deceit"—almost as a testament to support his earlier statement.

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[86] Anirudh Singh (*raja*), interview by Sarah Levenstam, Shimla, 3 April 2013.

The authority of the local Raja, *Pujari,* and other positions in the temple hierarchy rests in this specific localized tradition; attached to their hierarchy is the establishment of "official" religious ceremonies and required community worship of a god that has all the legitimacy of Shiv, but is entirely distinct and must be approached differently. As the gap between the villagers and their local *devta* is maintained, the gap between the figures of Seep and Shiv narrows, and Seepur transforms slowly into "Shivpur." The local constructs, the foundation of the immediate hierarchy in the village, is threatened from the bottom-up.

Sanskritization as a Reaffirmation of Caste

Sanskritization, in any form, is a reaffirmation of the pre-existing caste hierarchy. The emulation of the "superior" castes inevitable lends legitimacy to that authority, and in this way the act of Sanskritization in Seepur is no different. The purpose of "Sanskritization" for members of the lower caste or other marginalized groups is to "attempt to raise their status (ritual or otherwise) by imitating, emulating or adopting the behaviour and thinking of groups with higher status;"[87] this process has been taking place in Himalayan villages through plainsward mobility ever since interactions between the hills and the lower regions of the subcontinent began. This newer form of Sanskritization manifests in the same way—through the emulation of legitimate practices of the "Great Tradition" across India—but has a distinctly original, oppositional purpose. This Sanskritization is not simply a reaffirmation of caste constructs; in fact that appears as almost an accidental result of the process. In this form, Sanskritization acts to de-legitimize the hierarchy that is most immediate to the villagers—the hierarchy determined by the "Raja" and authority within the village itself. The Seepur villagers' purpose in affirming stronger connections to Shiva and thus to the Indian "mainstream" is not to become caste-legitimate in the

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[87] Sinha, "Problematizing Received Categories: Revisiting 'Folk Hinduism' and 'Sanskritization,'" 103.

eyes of all-Indian caste-embedded Hindus, rather their purpose seems to be to make obsolete a different form of rigid and controlling hierarchy.

THE POSSIBLE PITFALLS OF SANSKRITIZATION

Despite the apparent anti-hierarchy impetus of Seepur's form of Sanskritization, there exists the possibility of negative consequences, including the potential substitution of one restrictive hierarchical system for another. One of Berreman's conclusions when he visited the Himalayan Hindu villages was that "the Indian ethos is not one of equality but one of hierarchy, of which caste is the epitome. The upwardly mobile Indian peasant seeks superiority, not equality."[88] This opinion is supported by the form that Sanskritization takes in promoting the established authority, and legitimizing a widespread form of hierarchy that has been manipulated by those in power for centuries—caste. As the role of Hindu mythology in caste is paradoxical—both reaffirming and opposing an individual's caste—Sanskritization has the potential to do the same—reject internal, local hierarchy by reaffirming external, more remote constructs. In each instance, "internalised ideas of natural and given hierarchies have been the legitimising bases for not challenging utter humiliation and degradation."[89] The underlying predicament of any form of Sanskritization is that it acts within the context of caste, and does not challenge that form of hierarchy. It is crucial to appreciate the positive intent of this Sanskritization, but also to be wary of possible outcomes: "not recognising the hold of sanskritisation and its implications for the reproduction of the caste system and of subjected identities is myopic. Some scholars see such emulation of upper caste norms as a reproduction or replication of the caste system and link it to the assertion of identity and to attempts towards status parity with recognised superiors [Karanth 2004]. *Views such as this attempt to give recognition to such social practices as the only way to*

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[88] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*, 225.
[89] Vasavi, "Caste Indignities and Subjected Personhoods," 3767.

gain acceptance in the dominant and hegemonic order and do not assess the implications of these practices in terms of what their significance for the constitution of caste identities and the reproduction of the system itself."[90] An important conclusion to be made from the existence of Sanskritization as the acceptable method of undermining authority is the ultimate "failure of the modernization agenda…[to provide] an alternate non-caste basis of identity formation."[91] This fact, even in the wake of a movement to challenge localized structures of hierarchy, presents an inevitable fault of the process itself.

The Appeal of the Hindu Right

Arising from the Independence movement in India, Hindu nationalists strive to demonstrate the unity of the nation by presenting an image of "Hinduism" that is homogenous. "Hindu-extremist politics actually has its origin more than a hundred years ago, at the same time that Indian nationalism was born."[92] V.D. Savarkar's text *Hindutva*, published in 1923 during the struggle for Independence, gave rise to a particularly exclusionary strain of "Hindu nationalism." Savarkar described in his text what it means to be "Hindu," but more importantly who is included under "Hindutva," or "Hindu-ness," which focuses on nation, race, and civilization— noticeably avoiding the topic of "religion."[93] The religious majoritarian intent of the Hindu right emerged in full force during the 1980s amidst the controversy of Ayodhya and other Muslim-Hindu disputes. Currently, the *Sangh Parivar* organization, composed of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), among other right-wing Hindu organizations, promotes Hindutva as defining who is truly "Indian." The BJP now is one of

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[90] Vasavi, "Caste Indignities and Subjected Personhoods," 3767, emphasis mine.
[91] Vasavi, "Caste Indignities and Subjected Personhoods," 3768.
[92] Partha Chatterjee, "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism," *Social Research* 59, no. 1 (1992): 148
[93] Arvind Sharma, "On Hindu, Hindustān, Hinduism and Hindutva," *Numen* 49, no. 1 (2002): 22

India's two most prominent political organizations, along with the Indian National Congress, and strongly promotes "Hindu nationalism" as "Hindutva." Beliefs and practices of the Hindu faith have little to do with this form of "Hindu," which presents an Indian "unity" that ignores sectarian differences and even includes Buddhism and Jainism in this political context. The emphasis on Hindu unity and the focus on "the difference between themselves and others, the distinctions between 'us' and 'them'"[94] that characterized communalism at the time of Indian independence still exists today, and mobilizes extremist forces to create a sense of "unity" among members of a group defined against the "Other." It is through this ideology, where "political Hinduism" becomes inclusionary, that an appeal is made by the Hindu right wing to those normally excluded or marginalized in Hindu society.

In *Indian Identity,* Kakar analyzes a speech by Sadhavi Rithambra, an active speaker on behalf of the *Sangh Parivar*, to describe the "constructed revival of Hindu identity"[95] that is manipulated by extremists to attract followers from all areas of the Hindu population. In her speech, Gods and heroes are "markers of the boundary of the Hindu community she and the *sangh parivar* would wish to constitute today and believe existed in the past…the gods and heroes are offered up as ego ideals, to be shared by members of the community in order to bring about and maintain group cohesion."[96] With a distinct understanding of the diversity existing within the religious tradition, various sects and disparate beliefs, "It is Rithambra's purpose to include all the Hinduisms spawned by Hinduism."[97] A sense of shared pride in Hindu antiquity is idealized, with the inclusion of the marginalized, low caste or previously isolated members of

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[94] Chatterjee, "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism," 158.
[95] Kakar, *Indian Identity*, 329.
[96] Kakar, *Indian Identity*, 332.
[97] Kakar, *Indian Identity*, 332.

Hindu society, "persecuting the other to idealize the in group."[98] The "Other" in this context is the Muslim population, the ancient "invaders" who threatened the indigenous "Hindu" culture, as represented in antiquity. Arguably, "it is this need for a continuity of cultural memory, of a common representation of the past in times of rapid change, even turbulence, which the *sangh parivar* addresses with considerable social resonance and political success."[99] The appeal of Hindu right-wing agenda is centered around "inclusionary" politics, and the sense of empowerment in finding a separate non-Hindu community inferior.

This Hindu right-wing concept of Hindu identity is undeniably appealing to members of the Hindu faith who have been marginalized in society; ultimately, this political "Hindu" identity veers away from the ritualized purity ideology implicit in Brahmanical Hinduism, and encourages the inclusion of all members of Hindu society. Those who benefit most, the lower castes, are supposedly empowered in this new Hindu identity, where this right-wing ideology "marks the low caste, non-sanskritised dalit as an object whose identity must be realigned and reworked. The range of re-Hinduisation and integration rituals that the *sangh parivar* has resorted to in north India highlights the extent to which dalit youth are sought to be domesticated and their emerging identity as dalit is sought to be checked."[100] These rituals and beliefs, wherein the lower castes actively undergo a renaissance of their identities, appear to detach individuals from the strain of marginalization. However, this sense of "empowerment" is oftentimes accompanied by a certain fervor to enact the ideology espoused by the Hindu right: "the absorption of these people into agendas and programmes by fundamentalist associations which give them a sense of agency but only by providing another enemy and an another "other." The

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[98] Kakar, *Indian Identity*, 332.
[99] Kakar, *Indian Identity*, 334.
[100] Vasavi, "Caste Indignities and Subjected Personhoods," 3768.

mobilisation of large numbers of dalits into the RSS and the Bajrang Dal and the violence that they have perpetrated against Muslims are representative of this."[101] The violent extremism accompanying the politics is not perpetrated by the majority of formerly marginalized followers of the Hindu right-wing, but the sense of purpose, right, and superiority vested in these communities has the potential to lead to an active attempt at dominating a seemingly inferior community.

Currently, in the hills of Shimla, there is an ongoing battle for political authority in the Legislative Assembly of Himachal Pradesh state government, reflected in the most recent state elections. The press recounts how "in the political landscape of Himachal Pradesh, royals still hold a mighty sway on the hearts of voters and trying to cash on it the Congress has fielded a fair share of royals in its list of contestants in the hope of wresting power from BJP."[102] The recent campaign was described in colorful terms: "While the royals are roughing it out on the roads of Himachal away from the comforts of their palaces ahead of the D-Day, the BJP is seen cautioning voters against 'feudal submission' to Congress' 'princely' candidates."[103] Seepur's Raja Anirudh Singh, one of those "princely" Congress candidates, won his election over the Kasumpti segment of Shimla district. The recent election proved the staying power of the "royals" in the hills: there was a majority victory for "royal" candidates. This political conflict between the former rajas and the right-wing BJP politicians resolved to the benefit of the royals in this last election, but it is not unlikely that villagers seeking to evade the influence of their rajas could vote differently in elections to come. As the village of Seepur identifies more strongly as "Shivpur," it may be turning away from the rigid structures of the local hierarchy,

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[101] Vasavi, "Caste Indignities and Subjected Personhoods," 3770.
[102] Chopra, "It's 'Raja' V/s 'Praja' in Himachal Assembly Polls."
[103] Chopra, "It's 'Raja' V/s 'Praja' in Himachal Assembly Polls."

and other villages across Himachal Pradesh may follow suit. If the local population continues to shift its identity away from its local deity and hierarchies and to align itself with a notion of a broader Indian identity reflected in "mainstream" Hinduism, this shift could have repercussions in the broader political arena. If the voters' choice continues to be between the "royals" and the BJP, political favor in the Mid-Hills could shift into the hands of the Hindu right-wing.

It is in this context that the previously isolated, currently Sanskritizing, villagers of Himachal Pradesh could be drawn into the agenda of the Hindu right. While the act of Sanskritization in the village of Seepur does suggest the villagers' discontent with the traditionally rigid local hierarchy, it may ultimately promote the agenda of Hindu right politicians in the region. As Vasavi witnesses in the study of *dalit* communities across India, those marginalized or isolated from status in current Hindu society believe they have the most to gain by promoting the "inclusionary" politics of the Hindu right. These communities, co-opted by this right wing ideology, indicate that "what energy and agency should and could have gone into reclaiming their own rights and contesting upper caste and class hegemony has now been diverted into fundamentalist programs in which their role itself is that of being a perpetrator of violence."[104] Looking to pre-established norms in Sanskritization as a method of gaining autonomy, promoting Shiva over Seep Devta, and practicing worship as it is practiced in the "plains" is reaffirming current frameworks in society that continue to disadvantage marginalized communities.

Loss of Local Culture

According to Vijay Stokes, a member of the Pahari community in Thanedar, an even more isolated Mid-Hills village about three hours from Shimla, local Pahari culture is being

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[104] Vasavi, "Caste Indignities and Subjected Personhoods," 3770.

"threatened." Modernity, with the slow immersion of once-isolated villages into the "white washed" all-Indian community, has brought about distinct change in practices and beliefs in Pahari culture.[105] Among these changes is the recent promotion of Hindi and English, rather than the local dialect, as primary languages in the modern education system—evidence of what Vijay Stokes describes as a "generational cultural gap."[106] As younger generations are encouraged to assimilate, through language and interests, the older generations must communicate with their own children on a pan-Indian, instead of local, level. Pahari culture, in dance and music, is simultaneously being co-opted by the Indian government, with its goal to present India as "unified" and to promote certain styles over others in the arts.[107] Mr. Stokes has witnessed his culture being misrepresented in promotional videos produced by the government, wherein normally impoverished communities are given colorful clothing, and are instructed in coordinated choreography, to present an essentially false image of Pahari mountain culture.

Sanskritization in Seepur, despite its impetus arising from the villagers themselves, is itself a threat to local culture. The attempt to undermine local hierarchy is taking place in the context of its attachment to the localized *devta*. Much of the village's unique culture is centered around the existence of the Seep Devta and localized beliefs—the methods of worship, the community festivals, occasions to dance and perform. As religion is oftentimes a defining aspect of communal boundaries and individual beliefs, in these villages the temple rests at the heart of local traditions. Inevitably, "the replication of upper caste practices among the low-ranked caste groups indicates…a form of consensus which largely accounts for the reproduction of both the culture of the caste (with its norms and ideology of purity, pollution, hierarchy and

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[105] Vijay Stokes, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Thanedar, 19 April 2013.
[106] Vijay Stokes, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Thanedar, 19 April 2013.
[107] Vijay Stokes, interview by Sarah Levenstam, Thanedar, 19 April 2013.

differentiation) and the system (of exclusion, identification, rules and regulations) across generations and in different spaces. The implications or direct results of such a process are that…culture and society are being eroded."[108] This Sanskritization currently taking place in Seepur is actively seeking to replace essential elements that make this culture distinct with "orthodoxy"—undermining the authority by undermining the distinct culture with which it is linked. The loss of local traditions, not only as a by-product of modernization and government attention, but also in transformation promoted by villagers themselves, is an unfortunate characteristic of this era. A serious consequence of the strong association between local hierarchy and local traditions is the dethronement of both simultaneously, in the attempt to undermine the one; however, there are efforts in place by members of the community like Vijay Stokes, who seek to "codify and preserve" local *devta* culture in the face of its vanishing.

CONCLUSIONS

In the study of the Seep Devta Temple, it is evident that modernization is having an effect on the indigenous culture of villages in Himachal Pradesh. In the context of the temple itself, the transformation appears as a new form of Sanskritization, which simultaneously rejects local hierarchy and reaffirms greater caste ideology. There are a series of possible consequences arising from this current transformation, wherein villagers may be persuaded by rhetoric of the Hindu right, having been previously marginalized from the "greater" Hindu society. Most concerning is the loss of the rich local cultures, centered around the *devta* temple, which has

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[108] Vasavi, "Caste Indignities and Subjected Personhoods," 3767.

already started to take place. The study of these diverse *devta* cultures and accompanying folk

traditions in Himachal Pradesh is an important project that may soon be impossible. Beyond

understanding the forces, like Sanskritization, that may be inadvertently leading to the demise of

these local traditions, it is a significant objective to study the local cultures themselves. These

cultures present an interesting insight into Indian traditions, and the attempt to study and codify

these village practices is a worthy cause.