Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions

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Reviewed by William S. Sax

Chetan Singh is former Professor of History at Himachal Pradesh University and was Director of the Indian Institute for Advanced Study from 2013 to 2016. The book *Himalayan Histories* consists of a number of republished essays plus two new chapters at the beginning. There are two main areas of focus in the book: the pre-eminent role of regional gods (*deota*) in traditional and contemporary politics, and the complexities of Himalayan pastoralism.

In Chapter 1 Singh pleads for more attention to poor and isolated Himalayan communities who have left behind few written records, and this results in a well-considered discussion of oral history. He also makes strong arguments, not only for the centrality of local gods (*deotas*) in traditional polities but also for their continuing relevance. Although Himachal Pradesh has made clear and quantifiable gains in virtually every social indicator of development, 'none of this has diminished the faith of village communities in their local gods . . . Therefore, the continued authority of village deities to decide important matters of secular (and sometimes even political) concern in large parts of Himachal comes across as somewhat of a puzzle. Perhaps', he writes, 'the village folk do not see the religious and the secular as discrete domains, but as fluid components of a single sphere' (p. 11). Indeed, the traditional inseparability of religion and politics is a claim that Singh makes again and again in the essays assembled in this book.

In Chapter 2, Singh discusses the degree to which mountain environments lead to distinctive social forms. He also takes up the thesis, introduced by Willem van Schendel (2002) and made famous by James Scott (2010), that the western Himalayas are part of a region, including highland South East Asia, which is characterised by anarchic communities

who have made a conscious decision to reject the oppressive states of the lower altitudes for the sake of freedom and autonomy.

In Chapter 3, Singh provides much useful material about the theocracies of the region; small territorial units ruled by local *deotas* (gods) from their temple-fortresses. He argues that the small isolated communities of the region needed a high level of solidarity for purely practical reasons. This solidarity focused on and was generated by the village *deota* in his temple. According to Singh, 'socio-political objectives' were couched in a religious register. The movement of communities from one place to another and the establishment of new ones were associated with the travels of local *deotas*. His main thesis is that these movements were a sort of code that signified the movements of people. On the whole, Singh confirms what myself and others have written elsewhere: that local deities were (and still are) regarded as kings (p. 47). He suggests that these small theocracies did not precede – as is often supposed – larger, more familiar kingdoms ruled by human beings, but were more likely imitations of them: an interesting thesis that is, unfortunately, directly contradicted on page 68. What Singh is trying to characterise here are the bases of community identification and solidarity: what one might call a kind of protopatriotism. He finds them in the cult of the *deota*s, in the popular protests called *dhoom* or *dum* (discussed here on page 50 ff., and the focus of Chapter 7), and in the festivals of Dashehra and Sivaratri. He argues that the organisation of the modern state did not eliminate the old theocracies, but simply added another layer to them. The old forms remain, but the contents of debate have changed radically, with local *deota*s leading resistance movements against development projects such as ski resorts and hydroelectric projects (pp. 52–54).

In Chapter 4, Singh deploys what one might call a 'legitimation' hypothesis to explain the origin and prospects of local *deota*s. 'Himachal hill rulers', he writes, 'realised quite early the power of non-military, hegemonic control'; they ruled their subjects 'through the clever use of religion' and 'religious symbolism' (p. 67; see also pp. 88–90). I find this hypothesis (which is not unusual in historical and anthropological writing) to be highly problematic since it asserts, in effect, that 'hill rulers' somehow stood above or beyond their own culture, without sharing the cosmological/ontological assumptions of their subjects. Singh seems to believe that, on the contrary, they shared *our* (modern,

secular, rationalist) worldview. He illustrates this argument with reference to the formal rulers of the former states of Kulu and Mandi, both of whom are temple images: Lord Raghunath, who arrived in Kulu in the second half of the seventeenth century (p. 59) and Lord Madho Rai in Mandi, who was installed as the formal ruler of the state in 1648. In both cases, 'religion' was for the human (co-)rulers of these states 'particularly useful as an instrument of social control' (p. 75). Singh then goes on to observe that in cases where a deity was formally installed as ruler, he was usually a form of Vishnu, even though worship of Vishnu hardly ever spread beyond the capital and the aristocracy. He also notes the important fact that local *deotas* remained subordinate to a state deity.

In Chapter 5, Singh continues with the same theme. He argues that when the (mostly oral and legendary) historical record suggests a change in the hierarchy of cults – for example when one *deota* defeats another – one should understand this as indicating past social change. Male deities tended to be highly involved in war and politics whereas a goddess, in areas where she acted as a ruler, was aloof and cosmic but superior (p. 83). It seems to me that Singh has neglected the fact that this difference corresponds to religious affiliation: warlike male deities are far more characteristic of the lower-lying, mostly 'Hindu' regions, whereas peaceful goddesses (along with the *deotas*' custom of fraternal and sororal visits to each other) are more characteristic of regions strongly influenced by Buddhism, eg Middle and Upper Kinnaur.

In Chapter 6, Singh once again raises the question of how best, in his capacity as an historian, to deal with the 'oral' culture of Himachal Pradesh. He returns to the myths of origin of the kingdoms of Bashahr and Kulu, and the main *deotas* Raghunath, Mahasu and Srigul. Central once again to the discussion is the relationship between the king and the state deity. Singh sees these myths and legends as means for binding people together and thus creating a sort of territorially based solidarity. He concludes the chapter by showing the continuing relevance of these ideas to contemporary politics.

Singh begins Chapter 7 with the claim that the western Himalayan environment required solidarity for practical ends like housebuilding and grazing, and that this solidarity was largely effected by the cult of the local *deota*. He argues that the peasant's voice or point of view has been largely excluded from political histories of the region but that this

omission can be remedied by research on the Dum – a traditional form of peasant protest that has been widely discussed in the literature – integrating 'popular memory' and oral history.

In Chapter 8 ('Between Two Worlds: the Trader pastoralists of Kinnaur'), Singh takes up ongoing debates about the nature of pastoralism. He focuses on Kinnaur, showing that there was an 'entwining of pastoralism, transportation and trade' there, which facilitated connectivities with Tibet. He is particularly keen to illustrate the 'adroit' movements of the Kinnauras between the worlds of commerce, pastoralism and agriculture, as well as between Tibet and India.

In Chapters 9, 10 and 11, Singh engages with a number of debates among students of pastoralism, arguing that it is dependent on other systems; that the Gaddi pastoralists of Himachal Pradesh are also agriculturalists and have a rudimentary caste system, thus countering the common premise that pastoralist societies are intrinsically egalitarian; and that pastoralism has often been a significant source of state revenue.

In Chapter 12, Singh reviews the various 'explanations' of polyandry, apparently agreeing with Goldstein that it 'is primarily selected not for bread and butter motives – fear of starvation in a difficult environment – but rather for the Tibetan equivalent of oysters, champagne and social esteems' (Goldstein 1978: 329).

In Chapter 13, Singh makes a clever distinction between the normative concept of 'modernity' and the more easily identifiable 'modernisation', and offers a useful discussion of how Himalayan communities acted as thresholds between Indic and Tibetan civilisations. He also discusses the role of literacy in traditional Kinnaur and ends by posing important questions regarding his central theme: local *deota*s. He asks if modernisation involves 'a shift away from earlier methods of invoking the village *deota* and towards a more secular discourse within constitutional institutions? Or was the earlier intervention of the *deota* actually political in essence and religious only in form...'? (p. 251–52). This is an important and fundamental question, which he leaves open.

In Chapter 14, he points out that precolonial towns were almost exclusively state capitols where *deota* lived. What heralded a new age more than anything else were the sanatoriums built by the colonial authorities.

Singh is one of the most eminent historians of the western Himalaya

and he has invested a great deal of thought about the nature and practice of regional historiography. Moreover, he is very familiar with anthropological literature, which he uses to good effect. This book is a must-read for every specialist on the region.

References

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