



Rural People of H. P. And Role of Local Deities Assisting in Environmental Conservation

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ABSTRACT

Himachal Pradesh is hilly state with rural population. People are God fearing and follow the rules of Deities and use ancestral knowledge for their livelihood. The villages Deities in Himachal Pradesh are not simply objects of worship which governs all social, cultural, moral, economic, religious and political life of the village folk, they have large number of traditions and conventions governing their day-to-day life. Life in rural area is dependent on agriculture and natural resources such as forests, natural water resources. Conservation of biological resources through religion and belief has a long history in H.P. There are a number of plants, animals, forests and lakes that are regarded as sacred and no exploitation is carried out there. In this way different species of trees and animals which are economically important are preserved forming a good genetic reservoir. Many problems related to environment degradation have been solved by obeying the rules of local Deity which are environment friendly. This spiritual knowledge and beliefs of villagers act as fundamental for developing environmental attitudes and values and change in resource use may contribute in environment conservation. This article aims to document the different practices/ rules of local deity having an inherent role in the conservation of biodiversity/environment in Kullu -Manali.

Key words: Environment, Biodiversity, Conservation, Deity, Faith

OVERVIEW

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Nature has provided light, air, food, and water as gifts for sustaining life. There is interdependence of life on nature and humans having awareness of this interdependence and started to worship the source of light, air, food, and water. In India we worship every living being and nonliving beings. Nature has been admitted, respected, feared and loved both for its instrumental and for its intrinsic value (James, 2000).

There are many references and quotes for the protection of nature in our Vedas. “The Earth is our mother and we are all her children”(Atharva Veda Bhumi Sukta) 6 “Do not cut trees because they remove pollution.” (Rig Veda 6:48:17) “Do not disturb the sky and do not pollute the atmosphere.” (Yajur Veda 5:43) “Don’t destroy forest with Tigers and don’t make forest devoid of tigers. Forests can’t be saved without tigers and tigers can’t live without forests because forests protect tigers and tigers protect forests.” (Virat Parrva 5.45-46). People of Himachal Pradesh mostly rural are strong believer of Local Deity. Himachal Pradesh, hilly state the abode of Gods and the land of snow, is situated in the north-west corner of India, right in the lap of the Himalaya ranges. People are God fearing and follow the rules of Deities and use ancestral knowledge for their livelihood. These rural people have developed symbiotic relationship between biological and cultural diversity. The people have a firm, almost a blind belief in the village deities, called *deo* or *devta*. He is a protector and a source of inspiration for all the villages. He is considered the *ishth* of the population inhabiting a village. Almost every village has a temple where they gather for common worship (Mian 1999; Thakur, 1998). The villages Deities in Himachal Pradesh are not simply objects of worship which governs all social, cultural, moral, economic, religious and political life of the village folk they have large number of traditions and conventions governing their day-to-day life. These cultural (Deity) institutions perform multiple functions in the society and have diversity in belief, functions and organization activities across the Himachal Himalayas. Interventions of local deity are sought by the village community, for their activities, for the benefit of good crops, healthy cattle, warding off disease and to fight evil spirits. As life in rural area is dependent on agriculture and natural resources such as forests, natural water resources so conservation of biological resources through religion and belief has a long history in H.P. There are a number of plants, animals, forests and lakes that are regarded as sacred and no exploitation is carried out there. In this way different species of

trees and animals which are economically important are preserved forming a good genetic reservoir. Many problems related to environment degradation have been solved by obeying the rules of local Deity which are environment friendly. This spiritual knowledge and beliefs of villagers develop the environmental attitudes and values and may contribute in environment conservation. There are many incidents of intervention in the decisions of policy making and day to day activities in the village by the local Deity. These intervention of local deity directly or indirectly in conserving environment and biodiversity has been observed and documented.

AIM

This article aims to document the different practices/ rules of local deity having an inherent role in the conservation of biodiversity/environment in Kullu -Manali.

METHODOLOGY

The primary information is based on many articles related to topic such as institute of Deity, Indigenous people and conservation, Traditional knowledge etc. Secondary information with respect to the institution of deity, their interference in daily activities and the rules and practices sacred groves and villages has been collected from local people through interviews and observations. For this purpose **villages Burua, Shanag, Goshal, Barehta. Palchan, Kothi, Solang, etc.of kullu Manali and Kulung** have been included.

DISCUSSION

LOCAL DEITY IN KULLU

The Kulu valley, with temples for over 300 deities, is known as the Valley of the Gods. Most villages in Kullu and Seraj have ancient temples dedicated to local gods and goddesses (devtas and devis). The institution of village Gods is the major custodian of the activities in a village society and the village God is the symbol of village culture. He guides in decision about marriages and deaths. With this cultural phenomenon in the background, the village society has grown like a family in perfect harmony (Sharma, 2005).

In Malana village local Deity even directs the followers to allow or disallow a new visitor to the village. In the village of Malana power and influence of the local deity Jamlu formed an integral part of social control generally and of the political and judicial machinery in particular. Jamlu Rishi, believed to be the chief among the Gods of the valley. **In Burua, Majach and Kulang villagers are devoted to Deity Jamlu.** The local deity Jamlu formed an integral part of social control generally and of the political and judicial machinery in particular. **Nine villages Goshal, Shanag, Majhach, Burua, Kulung, Palchan, Solang, Kothi and Ruad worship deity Nagdevta.** The deity system plays a dominant role in day to day affairs of the village

people who have a great faith in it for decision making and conflict resolution. However, the deity system is losing its dominance due to communication, infrastructure development i.e. roads, markets and media (TV, Radio) where influence in the social fabric is increasing (SPWD, 1995).

The institution of Deota has the following officer bearers in most of the villages in Kullu and they are described as:

Each deity has a *gur* to communicate with the devotees. There are three permanent members holding hereditary office in hierarchical order- the Karmisht (God's manager), the Pujari (priest), and the Gur ("mouthpiece" of the God). The Pujari and Gur are powerful figures in the village society due largely to the fact that they possess a virtual monopoly in interpreting "the will of God"- a vital consideration to a local community, particularly when a dispute of any kind has arisen. The Gur at certain ceremonies goes into a state of possession in which he becomes the vehicle of communication between the god and the villager.

Kardar(Manager): Considered as the head of the institution of Deota and plays a key role in the overall management of the whole system. He holds the keys of the temple and maintains cash accounts by keeping tracks of returns due from the Deota lands scattered in different locations throughout the village. He is also perceived as a sort of village headman and generally attends all important meetings.

Pujari (Preist): Performs prayers to the deities and maintains the sacred fire, also offers prayers during local fairs.

Gur (Oracle): Is the medium of the Deota. The Deota "enters" the Gur and communicates with the village people. The responsibility of invoking and representing the Deota has remained a hereditary feature with the privilege passing from one generation of Gur to the other. An hereditary Gur exists in the villages but in many instances may not be present due to various reasons.

Bhandari (Storekeeper): Assist the Pujari in various ways by helping in preparation of sandalwood paste, arrangement of transport of Deota goods and maintenance of the sacred fire.

Chhatadi(Informer): Informs the whole village of dates of religious functions and of meeting for conflict resolution.

Musicians ;Carries the musical instruments and play for the Deity

The Deota office bearers do not hold any political post. The village committee is responsible for co-ordinating all religious and social functions in the village. All these positions in village society's management of sacred sites were hereditary (Diack, 1897).

SACRED GROOVE

There are protected areas of local Deity to be protected by the local people due to their cultural and religious beliefs and taboos. People believe that the deities reside in them. Small forest patches dedicated to the local deities are under the governance of village Deity. Such forest patches are called "sacred groves" which are the tracts of virgin forest left untouched by

the local inhabitants, with rich biodiversity. Sacred groves are defined as small patches of native vegetation that are protected by traditional communities based on cultural/ religious beliefs (Gadgil and Vartak, 1976; Chandrakanth et. al. 1990, Ramakrishnan 1996).

Almost people of all villages obey the rules set by Deity and avoid the taking of wood and any other things from such areas. All forms of vegetation in the groves are supposed to be under the protection of reigning deity of that grove, and the removal of even a small twig is a taboo (Vartak and Gadgil 1973). Collection and removal of any material from the sacred groves is prohibited (Khan et al. 1987, Khiewtam and Ramakrishnan 1989). Sacred groves can be used as indicators for potential natural vegetation (Schaaf 1998) and are vital for well being of the society. Sacred groves or sacred trees serve as a home for birds and mammals, and hence, they indirectly help in the conservation of living organisms (Islam et al. 1998). They also play an important role in the conservation of flora and fauna. Besides, several rare and threatened species are found only in sacred groves. Trees in the area cannot be cut or felled, and all deadwood found in the forest is used in the temple located in the grove. In all the villages it has been found that a tree belonging to local deity is declared as sacred and protected. No one is allowed to use its twigs and other parts. Importance of such sociologically recognized plants which have linkage with the deities of the groves or other religious practices in maintaining the ecological balance was addressed by Rodgers (1994). Such sociologically recognized plants are called as ‘sacred species’. Almost all the major deities in the state have their own groves and hence the state can be called as Land of deities and sacred groves (Sharma, 2005).

DEVBAN IN MANALI

In Himachal Pradesh, the tradition of sacred groves is generally known as “dev ban” are a unique natural resource in this region. The *devban* of Kullu valley in Himachal Pradesh are an integral part of the *devta* system, a unique socio-cultural religious institution of this region. In Kullu manali sacred forest grove associated with ‘Ringu Nag’, is located in Railla. Forest groves have been named as Nagauni, Nager or Nage re Baun in local vernacular which associate them with Nag (Serpent/Cobra) and may be translated as ‘Forest belonging to snake God’. Naturistic and animistic forms such as *Nag* (snakes), *Vanshiras* (forest guardians), and *Jognies* (fairies) as well as various Gods of the Hindu pantheon are worshipped as *devta*. Specific forests adjacent to villages are said to belong to the respective *devta* and these forests are called *devban*. Temple groves of the sacred deodar tree are under the care of the devtas, protected against cutting. Temples may be within the villages or are on prominent locations in the forest. Religious and cultural importance of the species is a factor promoting their sustainable utilization as well as conservation (Singh et al. 1998).

INTERVENTION IN DAILY LIFE ACTIVITIES

There are many incidents when local deity intervene in daily activities and policy making for the protection of environment.

- ❖ Local Deities have their control on various activities of the villagers and people follow strictly the rules framed by them. One of example is of village **Goshal** where people are not allowed to use television and loud music system in the month of Jan –Feb. for one and half month as Deities **Beas Rishi, Gautam Rishi and Kanchan Nag** are supposed to go for Tapasya/ meditation. Most of the people also spent their time in spiritual activities as other activities related to entertainment are not allowed in those days. Even the agricultural activities are not carried out. On their return they make many predictions regarding the agriculture, diseases, environmental disasters and well being of the people of the area.
- ❖ The construction activities, agricultural activities sowing, use of tools in fields are banned for this period in many villages.
- ❖ Deoban are managed on the basis of rules of use which are specific to each and there is a significant distinction made between using the forest for the deities own use such as in temple repairs and in communal cooking during deotas fairs, and the use for human needs like fuel wood, fodder, poles and timber. Human use is believed to be determined according to diety's willingness and wishes.
- ❖ Local institutions play an active role in regulated collection and distribution of these forest products (Gupta 2005). Local herb collectors show a keen awareness of the regeneration capacity of various herbs. They follow a system of rotational closure. Herb collectors are aware that if the same area is exploited every year, there is insufficient regeneration and collection efforts prove to be drastically inefficient as the returns for time invested are very low. Aware of the fact that root removal affects regeneration, collectors make sure that a small bit of the root is left behind.
- ❖ Livestock are taken to pastures locally referred to as thach. Each panchayat has the rights of grazing cattle on a particular thach. Since pastures are grazed by rotation, there is good regeneration of nutritious grasses every year.
- ❖ Instances of communities protecting sacred tanks attached to temples, declaring sacred pools along certain stretches of rivers or protecting entire groves of trees also observed. The Upper Beas region has maintained several sacred sites.
- ❖ Incidents of opposing the construction of road in the inner forest area which is thought to be the place Deity by local Deity **Nag Devta** has been observed in **Solang area**.
- ❖ One of the hydro project supposed to be on **Chhod nala near Bahang** also objected by Deity **Jogini mata**.
- ❖ Local Deity opposes the Himalayan Ski Village Project proposed at Kullu which is unsuitable, and detrimental to the lives of the local community and environment of the region. On 16th February 2006 - A Jagati Puch or Dev Sansad (literally meaning parliament of gods) was held at Naggar at a local temple and the local deities, through an oracle, rejected the project on the grounds that it will bring doom for the people. They also

suggested that the battle should be fought at the judicial level. **Jamlu Rishi**, believed to be the chief among the Gods of the valley, has now become the symbol of the apprehensions. People see a project like this invading their cultural and sacred spaces. As the selected place for ski village place is also regarded as sacred place where deities go for Tapasya.

- ❖ There are many more incidents where local Deities intervene for the protection of nature and its resources.

CONCLUSION

There are many references and quotes for the protection of nature in our Vedas. Nature has been admitted, respected and worshiped by human since remote past. It has been found that people of Himachal Pradesh are strong believer of local Deity and have developed symbiotic relationship between biological and cultural diversity. The deity system plays a dominant role in day to day affairs of the rural people who have a great faith in it for decision making and resolution of the conflicts. There are small forest patches dedicated to the local deities are under the governance of village Deity which serve as a home for birds and mammals, and hence, they indirectly help in the conservation of living organisms therefore play an important role in the conservation of flora and fauna. People obey the rules of deity for the protection of environment. There are many incidents when local deity intervene in daily activities and policy making for the protection of environment. Many problems related to environment degradation have been solved by obeying the rules of local Deity which are environment friendly. The decisions of Deity committee are generally accepted and endorsed by the entire community. Many laws governing the biodiversity and environment conservation have also been enacted from time to time, people may follow them or not but rural people having faith in local Deity with traditional conservation practices obey the rules very strictly so local deity by setting the rules in accordance with nature for the inhabitants contribute in environment conservation. So for sustainable development we should take steps towards the conservation of environment and biodiversity.

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