# KARMA AND COVID-19: THE CASE OF DEITIES IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract

Some village deities in the Western Himalayas are regarded as gods-kings, enacting their (political) agency through ritual representation by a method of theistic rule locally known as *dev-raj* or *devta ka raj* (government by deity). The article examines the ways in which these deities were evoked during Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic is an opportunity to explore whether these deities are considered to be omnipotent gods. In the article we show that the deities sought to help prevent their followers from contracting Covid-19. In cases of illness from Covid-19 or death, the *devtas* said that they are subject to the laws of *karma* and cannot affect the destiny assigned to a person at birth (*greh*). Nevertheless, the balance between gods, *karma*, and *greh* is not explicit, as the followers of the *devtas* feel they can negotiate with the fruits of *karma*.

**Keywords:** Omnipotent gods; karma; Covid-19; deities and pandemic; Himachal Pradesh

## Introduction

The concept of omnipotent gods prevails in most Hindu traditions (Chadha 2015). This raises the question of how this notion can coexist with a belief in *karma*? Can the gods help humans and repeal the laws of *karma*? Are the gods subordinate to them? Willett (2015: 47) articulates the problem as follows:

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> (Karma) undermines the authority of deities. If karma ultimately dictates what happens to individuals who have incurred a karmic burden, this means that gods and goddesses can never be omnipotent and are ultimately subservient to the power of karma. This would make karma the supreme power in the universe and not Vishnu or Shiva as many Hindus believe.

Many scholars, especially ethnographers, argue that in practice the problem is not so complicated. Most Hindus do not fully accept the notion of *karma* (Willett, 2015: 48) or else it is relatively unimportant for them (Doniger 1976: 15). Moreover, when the idea of *karma* is present in the discourse of Hindus, it often coexists with other notions of destiny such as the influence of the stars and planets (Daniel 1983; Nichter and Nichter 2010) or a devotional theology (Doniger 1976: 14-15). In addition, as Babb (1983) mentions, *karma* is not necessarily fatal; it can serve as a drive to change future realities. It is worth making a distinction between the gods of the Hindu pantheon, such as Shiva and Vishnu, and the village gods (*gramadevata*). Whereas devotional Vaishnavite and Shaivite theology makes it possible to overcome the consequences of former actions, does this also apply to the village gods? In order to elaborate on this the current article examines how people in Himachal Pradesh coped with the emergence of the coronavirus in 2020. We look at how the locals perceived the pandemic, how the deities responded, and their role during this period.

## Village Deities in India

India abounds with village deities, known as *gramadevata.* Most village deities are female (Lewis 2016: 5; Kinsley 1986: 197-198), especially in South India (Whitehead 1976). They are usually symbolized in the form of shapeless stones, trees, or small shrines without any anthropomorphic image (Padma 2013, 49; Kinsley 1986, 198). Their devotees usually worship them directly, without priestly Brahman mediation and therefore without Sanskrit texts (Padma 2013, 49). Food offerings, traditionally animal sacrifices, are made to these deities (Lewis 2016). There is also an institution of mediumship related to them, with both men and women acting as mediums and performing healings, answering questions, and resolving disputes (e.g. Bindi 2012; Merz 2007, 210-211; Sharabi and Shalev 2018).

Each village identifies closely with its deity, because the deity guards the village boundary. The deity, usually female, is often presented in ceremonies as symbolically married to the village. As Kinsley (1986: 199) puts it: “they are married to each other and

nourish each other". The village deities attract far more attention from the villagers than the gods of the Hindu pantheon (Foulston 2002: 19; Weightman 1997: 225). For example, the deity's festivals are the concern of the whole village, whereas Pan-Hindu gods are only worshiped by some of the villagers.

Differences exist between the village deities in the plains of India and the *devi-devta* (goddesses and gods) institution in the Western Himalayas.[1] While most *gramadevatas* are goddesses, there are many male deities in the Western Himalayas. In some areas, like upper Shimla (Jubbal *tehsil*, for example), they make up the overwhelming majority. The deities dwell in shrines and temples, rather than stones and trees, and they usually have an anthropomorphic image. Moreover, most of them are worshiped by Brahmans using Sanskrit texts.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the *gramadevatas* of the plains and the *devi-devta* institution in the Himalayas is that some village deities in the Western Himalayas are regarded as gods-kings, enacting their (political) agency through ritual representation by a method of theistic rule locally known as *dev-raj* or *devta ka raj* (government by deity) (Moran 2019; Sutherland 2003). As such, they are considered to be the actual kings (*raja*) of their territories (*desh*) (Luchesi 2006; Sutherland 2003, 2006); they move in palanquins (*palki*) from one village to another in their territories (Berti 2009b; Sutherland 2003, 2006); they can geographically extend their political and religious power through space with the help of signs (*nishan*) such as images, swords, maces, and thrones (Sutherland 2004); and they have judicial competency, so they can pass judgment on interpersonal conflicts or dissension between villages (Berti 2009a, 2012; Malik 2016, 89-139). This local notion of divinity is in contrast to the Brahminic-Puraṇic tradition, where the perception of God is more abstract and sedentary (e.g. Fuller 1992).

## Perception of the *Devtas* during Life Crisis

Throughout India the village deities are concerned with the well-being of the villagers and consequently they are associated with matters such as disease and catastrophes, on the one hand (Kinsley, 1986: 198), and fertility on the other (Babb, 1975: 227). Their role is complex because although they can cure and save their followers, they can inflict diseases if they are not appeased (Dandekar and Dandekar 2011: 221; Kinsley 1986: 198; Santiko 1997: 214). While Foulston (2002: 123) agrees that local goddesses have a dual personality, she stresses that it is an "oversimplified misrepresentation" to describe

them as malevolent deities.

The effect of improved health care on the worship of the village deities is debatable. While there are those who argue that "female deities are losing influence […] with the introduction of modern medicines and methods of disease control" (Wiebe 1975, 42–43), others claim that it "does not alleviate the need for worshiping *gramadevatas*" (Padma 2013: 202).

Like the village deities of the plains, the *devtas* in the western Himalayas are also concerned with the well-being of the villagers (Mahajan 2011; Ramesh 2007). Thus, if misfortune befalls them – health problems, a failed crop, livelihood problems, a land dispute, and the like – they can approach the *devtas* for remedies. Through their mediums, the *devtas* can get to the root of the problem. The main reasons they suggest for such problems can be divided into three categories:

The first category is associated with *greh/graha*, (fate, or the influence of the planets). It is assumed that the cause of the problem was determined at birth. If the *devta* concludes that the problem is due to the person's *greh*, not much can be done by the *devta*. The villager then needs to seek bio-medical treatment.

The second category is associated with humans, both alive and dead. A frequent explanation for misfortune is *buri nazar*, an evil eye cast by ill-wishers. In many cases, the evil eye is cast by someone with whom the victim is acquainted. In the Western Himalayas the extended family usually lives together in the same house. Thus, problems are frequently related to this family structure, which may give rise to tension between nuclear families who live together under the same roof.

Another frequent explanation is *masan*, invoking the spirit of a deceased person in a living body. In some cases, the spirits of the ancestors are invoked. In Pahari dialect it is known as *paap* (doing of ancestral/soul). If any of the ancestor has something unfinished or unsaid during his life span, he can guide the successive generations to fulfil or complete as desired. It is believed that if something is going wrong in the successive generations that may be inflicted by the *paap dosh*. Families in upper Shimla area strongly adhere to the rites and rituals after death for four years so that soul of the dead remains satisfied and eventually leave the relations with the surviving members of the family.[2]

The third category is problems associated with *devtas*. First and foremost is the *dosh*, an affliction cast upon wrongdoers by the gods. The offender's misconduct could be directed either at gods or at other people. Some locals regard *dosh* as a punishment, others see it

as a wake-up call (*drishtant/dekhaiwli*), an indication that something is not going in the right direction. The person may see or sense the *dosh* and change their behaviour accordingly. Another idiom in this category is *chhua*, the prohibition on touching the food or beverages of certain people because of a conflict in some previous generation. Violation of this prohibition, imposed by a *devta* in earlier generations, may be the cause of the problem.

Whether the problem is associated with gods or with humans, it is clear that interpersonal relationships are important for understanding ailments and other misfortunes. This is evident in both the second and the third categories. The *dosh* can be cast upon a person because of misbehaviour towards others. The notion that healing begins at the level of interpersonal relationships is quite common in many cultures. In some cases, the interpersonal aspects are even personified. Sax (2009), for example, describes how an oracle in Uttarakhand uses a rope to bind the entire family together during the healing ritual. In many cultures these interpersonal relationships in ritual healing are expressed as an evil eye or witchcraft (Favret-Saada 1980; Evans-Pritchard 1972).

As we can see from the third category, *devtas* can afflict people. Thus, although they are perceived as kind and devoid of devilish inclinations, this does not mean they are incapable of harming those whom they judge to be wrongdoers. This raises the question of how people of the Western Himalayas perceived the Covid-19 pandemic? Did they believe there is a connection between the pandemic and the wrath of the gods? Did they think the *devtas* could help them cope successfully with the pandemic?

In order to answer these questions some 50 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with locals from Shimla district, Himachal Pradesh. The age of the interviewees ranged between 30 and 75, and most of them were men. Some of the interviewees were approached directly, while others were reached through the "snowball approach" (Goodman 1961). Some interviews were conducted via phone and Zoom applications, due to government restrictions during lockdown. The interviewees are locals of a region known as upper Shimla, specifically the tehsils Theog, Kotkhai, Jubbal, Rohru and Chirgaon. We chose upper Shimla as the site of our research because of its diversity. The region presents various socio-economic factors such as literacy rate: while some *tehsils* have a high literacy rate (e.g. Theog) other *tehsils* have a relatively low literacy rate (e.g. Chirgaon). Moreover, we are very well-acquainted with this region. One of the authors was born and raised there, while the other author did fieldwork in the region in previous years. Our

familiarity with the region and with the locals helped us to advance the research under the difficult conditions caused by the pandemic and the restrictions imposed by the authorities.

## The Role of *Devtas* during Covid-19 Pandemic

When Covid-19 first appeared in early 2020, the authorities imposed restrictions on the local populace. People were required to remain at home except stepping out for essentials, such as buying food. Mass gatherings were forbidden, including religious activities. In addition, residents were required to observe specific instructions - wear masks, maintain social distance, and adhere to health regulations.

The responses of the deities to the government restrictions varied. While some *devtas* donated money and gold to the government from their treasuries, others were displeased with the restrictions on religious activities. These *devtas* referred to a popular saying in upper Shimla, *rawali aur dewali*, meaning the court of law or the *devta's* law – these two jurisdictions do not go hand in hand.

The *devtas'* injunctions to their followers with regard to the government's rules also varied. While some deities directed people to follow governmental guidelines, others assured their followers they need not worry. Therefore, some locals refused to obey the government's instructions (such as wearing masks), with the backup of their deities.

Whatever the perceptions of the *devtas* regarding the pandemic and the government's restrictions, they insisted that some customs and traditions (*karaj aur kar*) had to be maintained, even during Covid-19. Chief among them was the daily *puja* (worship) in the temples. This offering (once or twice each day) was held even when the government-imposed restrictions on movement and participation in religious activities. The locals claimed that this pertains to the relationship between the *devtas* and their followers (*mujham mamla*), and therefore the government cannot interfere. In general, large festivals were not held or else they took place symbolically with few adherents. However, small-scale festivals at the village level continued almost as usual.

Not only did the *devtas* express their opinion on government restrictions and which customs should be upheld even during the pandemic, they also sought to help the local population deal with the pandemic. Not surprisingly, given their traditional role, the *devtas* told their followers they would protect them from Covid 19. See, for example, the words of a villager from Theog tehsil:

> The *devta* says, "if you will be loyal to me or have devotion for me and will not follow the people outside (foreign to them), I can save you.[3] I can save you in my area/jurisdiction. Epidemics (*mahamari*) hit any times I am always there to take care of. I have saved you through generations and will save in futures."

As can be seen, some *devtas* included a disclaimer with their protection, informing their followers that they would only protect them in their own jurisdiction, so they should stay in the *devta*'s territory (*desh*). This accords with the notion that the *devtas* are rulers who have territory (Moran 2019; Sutherland 2003) and judicial competency within their territory (Berti 2009a, 2012; Malik 2016, 89-139).

The villagers are obviously aware that Covid-19 is a pandemic, so they do not associate Covid-19 infection with the *devtas*. Therefore, one who is infected usually does not consider it to be a *dosh* (infliction) cast by a *devta*. See, for example, the words of Mutilal from a village in Rohru tehsil:

> Today everybody has access to television, and the news and debates are flooded with the Corona virus, so people know that the cause of the spread is not *devta*, but it is something foreign to the people. But people in the village have a faith that they will be saved from this pandemic by *devta* and *devi*.

Mutilal emphasizes that the locals are aware that Covid-19 is a pandemic and not the result of the *devtas'* actions. What happens, then, if someone is infected by the Coronavirus disease? If not the *devtas*, then who or what is the cause of the infection? The villagers may suggest that infection by Covid-19 is determined by the *greh*. That is the position of the stars when a person was born. It is believed that the *greh* results from the person's *karma* (actions) in previous lives. Therefore, contracting Covid-19 (and the suffering that may accompany it) is inevitable, as it is the person's fate.

Another explanation that the locals offer for one infected with Covid-19 (made by the younger generation) relates to the person's conduct during the pandemic. For example, if the person did not wear a mask in enclosed spaces, participated in mass events, or did not observe social distancing. "Not *dosh* and not *greh*," said a 30-year-old local from Jubbal *tehsil*, "the infected people are infected due to their lack of precautions."

Although the *devtas* were not perceived as the cause of the illness, the villagers believed that the *devtas* could cure them if they contract the disease. Here is an example from Vijay, a villager from Rohru tehsil:

> When I was in the hospital, I was stressed. But I always had my *devta* in my mind. It took a long time to come out of this pandemic and its after-effects. But I owe this to my *devta*. Many people in the hospital passed away, even in my ward of the hospital. After returning to my village, I offered *tikka* (money offered to *devta,* which is promised as gratitude if the person's wish is fulfilled). I could come out of the negativity due to my *devta*.

Vijay speaks of the *devta* not only as the one who helped him heal but also as the one whose presence helped him overcome the mental crisis he experienced during his illness. As we can see from this example, modern medicine (and science in general) is accepted as a knowledge system by the local populace. It does not take the place of the gods or traditional medicine, as some have suggested (i.e. Wiebe 1975, 42–43), rather it complements them. Indeed, in some places in South Asia, psychological, medical, and scientific-rational discourse plays a role in traditional healing (Dein, Alexander and Napier 2008; Ranganathan 2017; Sharabi, forthcoming).

Although the *devtas* stood by their followers and promised to protect them, Covid-19 brought death to upper Shimla. However, the locals did not blame the *devtas*, nor were they disappointed. If someone died, the belief was that their life was complete because birth and death are predestined, and even *devtas* cannot change one's destiny. The *devtas* stressed that people bear the fruits of their *karma* (action), *greh* (stars) and death. Often, *devtas* say that death has not spared even *bhagwan* (God), and therefore even gods like Brahma and Ram have to die.

Here is the case of Parveen, a retired school teacher from a village in Theog *tehsil*. Not only was he a follower of Chikreshwar *devta* but he was also a medium (*gur/devan*). After contracting the virus, he passed away. After his death, his family inquired whether his death was due to some issues with the *devta*. The *devta* wailed and said that Parveen had served him throughout his life: "He was my devotee," said the *devta*, "and I always protected him even when he was away from my territory." The *devta* stressed that he is not here to take life but to save life.

If a *devta* is asked why a devotee (*bhakat*) has died, a common answer in upper Shimla is that the *devta* spared the deceased from evils such as disease, but even a *devta* cannot fight death. The *devtas* may claim to protect a person from harm (*dosh*) inflicted by the *devtas* themselves, but they cannot protect people from *greh/dasha* (conditions or circumstances) which are regarded as something which one is bound to suffer. In this context, the *devta* says "*greh/*

*dasha to devta ko bhi aate hai" (*even gods/goddesses are not spared by *greh / dasha*). That is, conditions created by a pandemic by which even a *devta* is affected.

## Conclusion

The deities in upper Shimla sought to help prevent their followers from contracting Covid-19. They promised to protect them, especially if they remained in the deities' territories. Nevertheless, some locals became infected and even died. How did the *devtas* and the locals explain this? The younger generation focused on the behaviour of the people, claiming that they were careless and disregarded rules such as wearing a mask and maintaining social distance. They also applied the notion of bad behaviour in this life (*karma*) that could generate problems. The older generation used terms like *karma* and *greh* to explain the misfortune of infection, disease, and death.

The *devtas* themselves confirmed this view by saying that they too are subject to the laws of *karma* and cannot affect the destiny assigned to a person at birth (*greh*). Nevertheless, the balance between gods, *karma*, and *greh* is not explicit. Throughout the pandemic the gods offered their protection and healing powers. Even if it seemed that they were unable to save people, they still promised to help and protect. This was often encouraged by their followers, who turned to them for healing.

Ultimately, the *karma* theory is very vague for the locals. It operates as a satisfactory mechanism, organizing the thought of the locals towards what the locals see as a reasonable reality. Therefore, the followers of the *devta* can assume that the level of satisfaction of this birth or previous birth. It can explain why even the deities sometimes cannot help. However, it doesn't cause the locals to be in a fatal mood, as the followers of the devtas feel they can negotiate with the fruits of *karma*.

## Notes

1 Departed ancestors, who had made great sacrifices for the family, may also be revered as *devtas* and worshipped periodically. Their idols are carved out in slate or metal which are symbolic and worshipped with reverence.

2 There are two practices which are common among the villagers to invoke the soul —one is similar to the medium system where one or two people (*mashania*) in the community can speak on behalf of the soul by touching the soil of his/her house. He can call out loudly the names of the persons whose souls are there from the previous generations. After identifying the *mashania*, he/she speaks out on behalf of soul. The family members are apprised of the *paap*

*dosh* if any and the way to resolve it. The second practice is to invoke the soul at home when all members of the family sit together in a room at night and chant the mantras (with distinct sounds and lyrics). The soul enters in any of the members of the family whose body starts shaking and pronounce out loudly the name of the dead one and speaks on behalf of him.

3 *Ze meri bhakti karole aur desho sang na daiole to raksha karuma*

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