

Devaban Institutions in Kullu: Transformation, Adaptation and Potential

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Modernity in Indian society is in practice a constant negotiation between cultures and institutions that are centuries old and those more recent, between subsistence-based practices and market relations, between the local and non-local. The modern and pre-modern infiltrate and transform each other until the one is indistinguishable from the other. Thus the task of identifying and classifying a particular society, group, or social institution as traditional or modern is always fraught with the danger of simplistic misrepresentation. Rudolph and Rudolph (1967:1) discussing political development in Indian society observe that, 'the assumption that modernity and tradition are radically contradictory rests on a misdiagnosis of tradition as it is found in traditional societies, a misunderstanding of modernity as it is found in modern societies, and a misapprehension of the relationship between them.' Instead, what emerges in rural India are 'hybrid modernities' that challenge the dichotomy between developed and underdeveloped (Gupta, 1998) and blur the boundaries between the modern and traditional. Institutions embedded in such social relations reflect these dialectical outcomes, and need to be evaluated in these dynamic terms.

Rural societies are closely linked ecologically, culturally and economically to the natural resource base that sustains them. Institutions that manage these resources have been and continue to retain a place of importance in rural social life. In the last four decades in India, rural institutions that manage natural resources have received much mainstream attention due to environmental threat perceptions. Forestry institutions in particular have been

significant, and every five-year plan in India since independence has focused on building and sustaining institutions for managing forests. At independence, the spotlight was primarily on building new or modern institutions as the panacea to slow the onslaught of deforestation. The last two decades however have focused increasingly on traditional institutions of forest management (Ramakrishnan et al., 2000). There has been an effort to unearth and understand local-level institutions that are found all over rural India for the management of natural resources. This has followed or reflected the international focus on traditional and indigenous ecological knowledge (Brokenshaw et al., 1980; Warren et al., 1989; 1993; UNCED, 1992; Davis and Ebbe, 1993; Seeland and Schmithuesen, 2000).

This concerted focus on traditional natural resource management practices has shown that many rural societies have successfully integrated social and ecological systems in ways that are specifically suited to local conditions. This makes them more socio-culturally acceptable as well as sustainable in the long run. Sustainable natural resource management requires such systems that are location specific. However, less attention has been paid to change, turmoil, mutation and conflict within these traditional systems as they interact with broader social changes. This process of catharsis is equally important for the sustainability of these institutions. An analysis of this metamorphosis of older or traditional resource management institutions is essential to their very survival.

In Himachal Pradesh, as in many other regions of India, religion and belief systems have traditionally been integrated with natural resource use and management. This complex of religion and natural resources often forms the core of social and cultural life. This integration is exemplified in the institution of the *devaban*. The realms of faith, and beliefs about natural resources adhere in this institution. The changes in both these systems are reflected in the changing dimensions of *devaban*. *Devaban* is the local term used to refer to forests that are considered sacred in the Kullu region of Himachal Pradesh, India. These are similar to sacred groves described in the literature in other regions of South Asia, but can also be translated as forests of the *devata*.

Devaban are found all over Himachal Pradesh, particularly in the moist temperate regions of the state that are densely forested.

Often, such forests are visible markers in the landscape. They stand out as oases of dense diverse forests amidst an agricultural landscape or monoculture forests. These forests are managed by local communities through the *devata* institutions, aided by a system of beliefs that encompass the lives and livelihoods of these communities. Such *devaban* are found in Kullu, Mandi, Chamba and Shimla districts of Himachal Pradesh. Local discourse in Kullu claims that the landscape was dotted with many such *devaban* in the past. Today about half a dozen well-defined *devaban* are found in the Sainj and Thirthan valleys of Kullu district. The following discussion is based on a study of these *devaban*. These *devaban* today are traditional institutions that lie at the intersection of cultural and ecological practices. Changing religious beliefs, transmuting cultural practices, economic transition, and an emergent green consciousness have all left their mark on this traditional institution. They now lie in the discursive terrain of tradition, culture, modernity, markets, and conservation. They represent a religio-social system that is today isolated in small pockets, challenged continually by broader cultural and economic forces. On the other hand, they have entered the conservation discourse and politics since they represent unique ecological islands. These institutions present case studies of both ecology and culture in transition and adaptation. It is important to understand their traditional underpinnings as well as the adaptations of the ones that have survived, since they provide us with a glimpse into local processes of resource use and management.

Sacred forests or groves have been identified in many regions of India (Gadgil, 1975; Gadgil and Vartak, 1976, 1981a & b; Chandrakanth et al., 1990; Chandrakanth and Romm, 1991; Induchoodan, 1991; Gadgil and Chandran, 1992; WWF 1996; Kalam, 1998). Some authors have argued that these groves are 'one of the finest instances of traditional conservation practices' (Gadgil and Chandran, 1992:183), while others have questioned the conservation ideals attributed to the management of these forests. From his study of *devaraksdus* in the Coorg area of Karnataka, Kalam (1998) has concluded that 'while in general, and in a loose manner, it is fine to say that the *devarakadus* have been preserved because of religious sanctions and injunctions, in practice, and at a pragmatic level, there is very little evidence to support this thesis'. Whether ecological conservation is an intentional result of local practices or an unintended byproduct, the net result is remarkable.

Sacred groves have generally been seen as examples of traditional conservation practices, repositories of indigenous knowledge, and models of community based biodiversity conservation. While each of these attributes may be appropriate in particular social conditions and in particular periods of time, it is crucial to study *devaban* as traditional social institutions enmeshed in changing social structures and processes. They reflect the encounter between 'traditional' mores, beliefs and social relations, and 'modern' market forces and social codes. Some have failed to adapt to these changing conditions and have disappeared from the social landscape. Others have changed and adapted to such an extent that they need to be seen as modern institutions with new emergent roles.

There are at least three major types of sacred forests that can be distinguished. First are forests that have been defined as sacred by some community of users. These forests are sacred and have religious/cultural/emotional value in local discourse and practice, irrespective of the actual legal ownership of the land or trees. Thus it is possible that what is a reserved forest in legal ownership documents, is considered in local discourse as a sacred grove. In this form of sacred grove, the entire forest ecosystem including all the fauna and flora enjoy protection.

Second, there are particular species of trees that have sacred value, and thus clusters of this species form a sacred forest. Here the value attached is to the particular species and other coexisting species may not be protected. Specific deodar (cedar/ *Cedres deodara*) trees in Kullu are often considered sacred, believed to hold the spirit of some *devata*. The *Vanshira* of Kullu is one example, where a particular deodar tree is believed to be the guardian of the forest. It is relatively common to find iron nails driven into trees, pieces of red cloth or old iron articles left below such a tree. In a hamlet just above the main town of Sainj in Kullu district, one such tree in a glade is surrounded by several hundreds of old and new iron articles, including sewing machines, *trishuls*, spades, hoes, etc.

Third, there are forests that are the legal property of the *devata*. In general, the property of the *devata* is sacred, although conversion from one form of property to another may be entirely acceptable. This is significant since sacredness is not embodied in the particular object or place; it is sacred mainly by way of ownership. This does not provide the same level of ecological protection as the earlier

two types of sacred groves. Harvest or sale of forest produce for conversion into other forms of temple property could be legitimized more easily under this system. All three types of sacred forests are found in Himachal Pradesh, often with one type overlapping or intermixed with the other. The management of these sacred forests is closely interwoven with the entire *devata* system that forms the core of rural social life.

DEVATAS AND DEVABANIN KULLU

The *devata* system of Kullu is a significant local social and community institution that occupies an important space in the religious and cultural world of local people. Each cluster of hamlets in Kullu has its own *devata*, who maintains kinship relations to *devatas* in other parts of the valley. It is estimated that there are over 300 such *devatas* in the entire Kullu valley. Some Kullu *devatas* like Jamlu of village Malana have gained much attention on account of their influence in the organization of social life, and power in the judicial and political life of village society (Shuttleworth, 1917; Rosser, 1960; Singh and Sikka, 1992)

Naturalistic and animistic forms such as *Nag* (snakes), *Vanshiras* (forest guardians), and *Jognies* (fairees) as well as various forms of the Hindu pantheon gods are worshipped in this region as *devatas*. However the uniqueness of the Kullu *devatas* compared to the gods of the plains, is that they interact with villagers at an everyday human level. Thus the *devatas* dance and celebrate with people, engage in petty tiffs with each other, and play pranks on villagers. 'They eat, drink, walk, live and dance with their worshippers.' (Thakur, 1997: 65). They are also involved in an elaborate system of kinship, which is guided by mutual dependence, patronage, and reciprocity. The Kullu *devata* is a social figure who is closely involved in everyday activities of his/her constituents. This is described eloquently by Shabab (1996) thus:

The village gods and goddesses here are not statues but are expected to behave like common human beings with sentiments and a sense of pride. Sometimes they arrange fights against their counterparts, win or lose battles, do things unbecoming of godly beings and even share a joint family system like their devotees; they cut jokes with the villagers, are offended by trifles and threaten to harm the evil doer, and dance with the villagers while being carried in wooden or silver palanquins.

Devatas own property of various kinds—temples, idols, palanquins, jewellery, agricultural and forest lands. *Devaban* are only one of the constituents in the asset portfolio of the *devata*. Depending on socio-economic conditions, one form of wealth may be converted into another. The *devata* is recognized as a legal minor and the property is managed on behalf of the *devata* by the *devata* committee. This committee is a hereditary institution that consists of a number of functionaries. In general this committee consists of the following members: a *hardar* who is the overall manager of the affairs of the *devata*, a *bhandari* or storekeeper, a *kayath* or cashier/accountant, a *pujari* who conducts the rituals, one or more *gurs* who act as the oracles receiving and conveying messages of the gods to people, and several *bajantris* or musicians. Caste hierarchies are reflected in this organization. Except for the musicians who are lower caste men, all the other members of the committee are upper caste men. Men of the most powerful households within the village often hold the positions on the *devata* committee. Only the higher castes have the right to carry the palanquin of the *devata*. Lower castes are prohibited from touching the *devata* idol but they lead the *devata* processions since they play specialized musical instruments. The *devata* travels often to *melas* (fairs), to visit other *devatas* who are kinsmen, to houses of devotees on special occasions like marriages, or even to special forest retreats for the *devatas*. The most famous of these events is of course the Kullu Dussehra,* where most of the *devatas* of the Kullu valley congregate. The *devata* is usually accompanied by an entourage from the villages under the *devatas* reign, apart from the musicians and some members of the *devata* committee.

Some of the *devatas* of this region own forests or *devaban*. *Devaban* range in size from a few trees to forest tracts spread over several acres. They are managed on the basis of rules of use, which are specific to each *devaban*. There is a significant distinction made between using the forest for the *devatas* own use, such as in temple repairs and in communal cooking during *devata*'s fairs, and the use for human needs like fuel-wood, fodder, poles and timber. Human use is believed to be determined according to *devata*'s willingness and wishes. There is no one set of rules that is operative for all *devaban* or for all times. Generally in the forests of *devatas* like *Nag*, *Vanshiras*, and *Jognies*, which are manifestations of animistic

*Hindu festival held in October every year.

and natural spirits, rules regarding use of their *devaban* are more stringent. For instance in the *devaban* of Ringu Nag in Upraila village (Kullu district), all personal use is prohibited, except dry fallen wood and leaves for cattle bedding. Even these have to be collected without the use of any metal implements. Leather and alcohol, and women are prohibited from entering this forest. One day every year in August, during the local fair, people are allowed to enter with metal implements and harvest the wood required for the fair or for temple repairs. Hallan *devaban* in the same area does not even allow removal of leaves and deadwood. The sanctity of the forest can be defiled by the entry of women, lower caste people, or animals. Carrying leather objects or liquor into this forest is also a taboo. On the other hand other *devaban* have more flexible rules. Enforcement of the rules of management of *devaban* is primarily through religious beliefs of villagers. These rules of use and management are embedded in the particular social and ecological needs of the region as described further in this essay. Management practices of the *devaban* that have survived through the ages, have adapted to the changing socio-ecological environment. While some may aid conservation, other adaptations have deleterious effects on the ecology.

DEVATAS AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

Devatas occupy a very significant place in the religious worldview of local people. The *devata* system of Kullu closely reflects the everyday life and aspirations of villagers, their relationships, enmities and reconciliation. Thus the *devata* system is a socio-cultural, religious, and economic institution in this region. While the ecological contributions of sacred groves have often been highlighted in recent times, their significant social roles have rarely been elaborated.

Devatas are landowners in Kullu. In the last century, Kullu kings ruled on behalf of the *devata*. Thus all land in Kullu belonged to the *devatas* at least notionally prior to colonial rule, and the *devatas* were the main landowners of this region. This of course has no legal validity today. However, *devatas* continue to own small pieces of land and some existing *devaban* in the Kullu valley are the private property of the *devata*. Since the *devata* is considered a legal minor, his/her property is managed by the *devata* committee.

In earlier times, the *devata* made all major social decisions in

the daily lives of people. Thus marriages were fixed, property disputes were settled and community and household functions were decided in consultation with the *devata*. *Devatas* performed the role of an arbitrator and judge in settling disputes between villagers or between villages. This belief system also performed the role of the police and the forest department. For instance, rules in *devaban* were enforced through social consensus and individual faith. No separate policing organization was required. With changing governance environment, these functions have become less relevant over the years and other factors have become more prominent. However the *devatas* still retain nominal authority and play a role in everyday decisions of villagers in this area.

The *devata* system performs an important role in holding the community together on the basis of shared beliefs. Followers of a particular *devata* often identify together as a community. Managing the affairs of the *devata*, including collecting donations, building temples, accompanying the *devata* to various *melas* in neighbouring communities, and organizing *melas* are all activities that unite the community of followers.

Melas held in honour of *devatas* are an important economic and cultural space. They encompass religious rites and rituals, games and entertainment, trade, and cultural events. *Melas* serve an important social function in cementing social relations within the community and between neighbouring villages. These are occasions for social interaction. Since each community hosts its own *mela*, relations of reciprocity in hosting and visiting each other are established. The hospitality of particular families and communities are remembered and reciprocated. Thus even though two families may not meet during the year, relationships are maintained through close interaction during the *melas*. News from the entire valley circulates in the region. This was crucial in an earlier era when other forms of communication and information dissemination were rare. Even today in the more remote valleys, *melas* serve as an important site of communication. It remains a rare and unique occasion for organizations and individuals to communicate effectively with a wide rural audience. *Melas* are important locations and times when marriages are fixed and conducted. It is an opportunity for informal cross-gender interaction, where young people select their own partners. It is also a site where more formal marriages are arranged through interaction and agreement between families.

Social hierarchies of caste, class and gender are cultivated and reinforced through this institution. *Devata* committees are powerful social institutions and are dominated by upper caste men. Rules of entry into *devaban* also reinstate this hierarchy.

DEVABANS AND THEIR ECOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS

Ecological management involves regulated use of natural resources. *Devabans* exemplify regulated and monitored use of resources, although ecological management was not the stated or accepted *raison d'être* of rules. The significance of this type of traditional institution lies not in its ecological consciousness but in the lessons it offers for current management. Sustainable management of resources is often achieved in the *devaban* through the implementation of a variety of use restrictions. These restrictions remain dynamic. Different *devaban* may utilize different strategies based on local needs. Or the same *devaban* may use a combination of these rules at different times to achieve its goals. Use restrictions of various kinds were established to manage *devaban* depending on the resource base over which the *devata* exercised control and on social needs. Seven types of restrictions can be distinguished.

- Complete restriction: This bears close resemblance to the national parks and sanctuaries of today, where all human action within an area is prohibited. Such absolute restriction is rare and possible only when alternative forests are available for meeting the needs of the community. It is also essential that the power of the *devata* is recognized over a large area and restriction of outsiders is relatively easy. A caveat to complete restriction is that the forest can be used for the requirements of the *devata*.

- End use based restriction: This type of restriction is more prevalent. Uses are categorized based on the final use of the product. Wood for agricultural implements may be allowed but wood for fuel may be restricted. Wood for construction of houses may be allowed but not for sale. Fuelwood is allowed but not construction wood. This type of rule distinguishes between user groups and may privilege one group over another.

- Caste/gender based restriction: These restrictions are also prevalent, although problematic in the current era of democratic equality. Women and lower castes are most often restricted from entering a *devaban*, since they are considered polluting. Such

restrictions continue where the *devata* commands the respect of all castes and where mixed-caste communities exist. In this society, women and lower caste households are often the most intensive and regular users of forest resources since women are responsible for forest-related tasks in the gender division of labour, and lower caste households have few other resources to meet their livelihood needs. Thus restricting their entry reduces the use of these forests in general, but also serves to reinforce social hierarchies and inequities. This restriction is viable where alternative forests are available for use and sufficient for needs.

- Geographical or social community based restriction: This is a management strategy that is often adversely affected by colonial and postcolonial state policies. None of the *devaban* or other community resources are open access regimes. The community of users is well-defined and 'outsiders' or anyone not part of the defined community are not allowed any kind of use. Earlier village communities were able to enforce this rule strictly, both due to fewer outsiders in the area and due to widely accepted social authority. However with state taking over of forest management, their ability to exclude non-community members has been severely affected.

- Species based restrictions: Species based restrictions are practiced where particular species are perceived as scarce or valuable. These selected species are accorded special status and all harvest of these species is banned. The forest department also practices such species based restrictions, such as the periodical ban on the harvest of *Taxis* species.

- Quantity restrictions: Quantity restrictions on the number of trees that may be harvested is another practice that is common to both community management as well as forest department policies. This practice can be sustainable and healthy for a forest if managed properly. The number of trees that can be removed each year in a *devaban* is usually decided by the *devata* committee depending on the needs of the community and the state of the forest.

- Seasonality restrictions: Rules that define the season when particular species may be harvested are commonly found in many community-managed forests. For instance, grass harvesting is allowed in some *devaban* only for a few months after the rains when fodder has to be collected for the winter. In some *devaban*, timber harvest is sanctioned only during the *mela* season in July and August. This seasonality allows

biota to regenerate and also makes monitoring easy and effective.

The diversity in these restrictions is significant for forest management, since particular rules are appropriate in particular socio-ecological conditions. These rules of management in *devaban* often allow villagers to meet their livelihood needs while at the same time ensuring some degree of sustainability of the resource. Unlike legal forest restrictions that are more rigid, these rules are used in creative combinations in each *devaban* according to local needs.

TRANSFORMATION OF A TRADITIONAL INSTITUTION

Devatas and *devaban* have been influenced and affected by a number of social, economic and cultural changes in this region. Villagers claim that many more *devaban* existed in the past. Some of the existing *devaban* are facing serious threats from various forces. Some *devaban* bear the scars of recent harvest during this decade, while other communities discuss plans to harvest their *devaban*. In this context it is important to look at the adaptations that have allowed the remaining *devaban* to survive. At the same time, *devaban* are increasingly being seen as possible institutional models for community-based biodiversity conservation. It is crucial therefore to understand their current changes, challenges, and potential.

The linking of this valley to broader and wider markets has perhaps had the most significant effect on *devaban* since it has affected many facets of resource management. It has introduced cultural changes that have a distinct impact. But more directly, *devaban* have been converted into a potential market commodity. The monetary value of these forests has expanded tremendously. *Devaban* are found predominantly in the moist temperate belt, which have mixed forests of deodar and kail (blue pine/*Pinus excelsa*). Some *devaban* also have fir and spruce trees. These are the most marketable and economically valuable tree species in this region. Single deodar trees at maturity are valued at well over Rs. 50,000. Since *devaban* are old protected forests, they often contain trees of very large girth with high market value. The market for these trees has also expanded considerably. The awareness of this high economic value and the ability of villagers to sell these trees both in legal and illegal markets has increased since they now interact freely and confidently in this market. Cultural values have also been affected which makes such market interaction and profit-

seeking justifiable, and also desirable.

Culture and value-systems have seen a major transformation, partly due to exposure to other cultures but also due to changing lifestyles and livelihoods. Earlier the village formed the primary society of villagers and the *devata* occupied a central position here. Livelihoods were more dependent on the vagaries of nature and faith in the power of the *devata* was more absolute. In more isolated conditions, dependence on the immediate village community for survival was higher. Social sanctions were therefore more effective. The influence of state authority was weaker, and governance was centered at the village or regional level. Today this has changed considerably and state-level and national level authority and laws are more influential. Property disputes are now considered under the law of the nation, and are settled more often by the courts rather than the *devata*.

Since livelihood patterns have changed, dates for various functions are based on the convenience of villagers who are often employed in or linked to the wider state and national economy. The *devata* still approves these dates, but now retains only nominal authority. Since livelihoods were locally based, people were more able and willing to provide time and labour to manage the *devata*'s affairs. Today, younger villagers are more dependent on jobs in the larger economy, and the faith in the *devata* system is waning. Villagers dependent on the wider economy are less able and willing to waste time and labour on ritualistic practices. Thus it is becoming increasingly difficult to find villagers who can take a few days off from their work and travel with the *devata* to various *melas*. Villagers claim that the processions that follow *devatas* during their travels are considerably smaller today than earlier times. *Devata* functions have to be coordinated with public holidays to ensure wide participation. Networks between villages and neighboring valleys are also becoming weaker since new and wider networks have now become more important. Thus the willingness and need to visit neighboring *melas* is also decreasing. This is not to suggest that these processes do not occur any more. But their importance in everyday life of villagers is decreasing. Instead, considerations of government grants given to attend *melas* such as the Kullu Dussehra and interest in the tourist potential of such events serve as motivations for the continuation of *devata* processions.

Melas remain important sites of social, economic, political and cultural interaction. However, the transformation in the nature of

these interactions reflects the broader changes. These changes are more pronounced in larger villages and towns and district and block headquarters. Organization of the larger *melas* is a significant political activity that is closely interwoven with electoral politics, state and national level political parties. There is intense competition between political rivals and considerable fund collection. Sponsorship banners are prominently displayed at *melas*. Entertainment programmes in the larger *melas* is dominated by programmes based on mainstream Bollywood (Hindi film industry) culture and paid professional performers from outside the area. In some instances, even 'traditional' cultural programmes are performed by paid professionals. These replace the voluntary and spontaneous communal dancing that was an important part of rural Kullu *melas*. Smaller *melas* in more remote villages still retain these traditional cultural aspects, although a preference for more mainstream, 'modern' events is increasingly evident. Markets as always move with the times and the products exchanged reflect current preferences like watches and synthetic material rather than rough woollen articles and *pattus* (traditional women's attire). Stalls set up by government and non-government organizations with public service information and advertisements for products and services are prevalent in the larger *melas*. Weighing machines and vaccination information compete at these sites with the *devata's* blessings and traditional *vaids* (medicine-men). Modern herb-based medicines produced by multi-national companies are sold alongside the hand-ground herbal remedies. The juxtaposing of the traditional and modern in economic, social and cultural terms is exemplified at these *melas*.

Forest department, nationalized forest management, and forest policies have also affected *devaban*. Whereas previously the *devata* decided when and what to harvest, now it is at least partly decided by the forest department. Rotational felling cycles have been established, whereby any and all forests in a particular area can be harvested only during a defined and declared felling period once a decade. Thus *devaban* can be harvested only during the felling period of the particular forest area. This policy was established to control and monitor all felling in the state and prevent illegal felling. But it has affected *devaban* management in four significant ways. First, the *devata* is no longer the decision-maker. Permission from the forest department has become necessary for all harvests thus eroding the ultimate authority of

the *devata*. Second, felling can no longer be based on the seasonal needs of the community. The time of felling is decided and sanctioned by the forest department. Third, since the felling cycle occurs only once a decade, the pressure to fell during these cycles is very high, irrespective of actual needs. Fourth, felling in *devaban* is now managed by contractors who are more adept at dealing with the complex legal and administrative procedures, rather than village communities. Almost uniformly, the villagers or the *devata* committee give the power of attorney to contractors who undertake the entire felling and marketing. Only a small portion of the profits actually reach the village community.

Other adaptations reflect changing fashions. Temple styles have changed and adapted to meet changing trends and fashions. Wooden temples are often being replaced by cement and brick constructions. Brightly white-washed brick walls, painted with bright colourful flowers, leaves and snakes, and sometimes images of the Hindu pantheon are the norm in almost all the newly constructed temples in the region. Thus the needs of the *devata* itself are changing, and wood is no longer a necessity for the needs of the *devata*. This justifies the conversion of *devaban* since the *devata*'s requirement is now cash income and not timber.

Gurs or the oracles of the *devatas* are now facing new challenges and new issues. People no longer ask the *devata* to settle individual disputes. But new issues and modern politics are being resolved through this system. For instance, when the Great Himalayan National Park was notified in this region, villagers in the Sainj valley asked their *devata* if the park should be welcomed or opposed. In accordance with local popular sentiment, the *devata* opposed the creation of the park. This helped to solidify opposition to the park and helped organize a movement against the extinguishing of local rights in these forests.

Caste based discrimination even within the *devata* committee is sometimes questioned today. Hereditary positions can now be contested and the District Commissioner has the legal authority to hold elections for positions in the *devata* committee if needed. However elections have never been held in this valley although people are conscious of the possibility. A possible consequence of this traditional inequality is that new *devatas* have emerged who now cater to lower caste villagers.

Most of the changes described above have been detrimental to the continuation of *devaban* in its traditional social form and

function. However, a counter-trend to this has been the new environmental consciousness both from within and outside the local community. *Devaban* have quickly moved into this new 'green' discourse, where they are being described as repositories of traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable management practices. Local and non-local non-governmental organizations, funding agencies, researchers, and media visit these localities to document and interview villagers on traditional natural resource management systems. This has infused a new consciousness as well as new creative interpretations of systems such as *devaban*. Local youth often point out these forests to visitors as an example of sustainable local natural resource management. This has provided a new rationale for the continuation of *devaban*. The current context in this region is complicated by the parallel existence of projects such as Joint Forest Management that attempt to create community institutions for forest management as well as national parks that exclude communities from forest management and decision making. *Devaban*, used as exemplars of the capability of communities to manage forests sustainably, provide a major boost to those arguing for community participation in forest management in the arena of national and international environmental politics. Thus for the *devaban* that exist today, the driving force behind their management has changed radically. They are both traditional and modern in their existence, and their religious and ecological roles are in a constant state of volatility.

These social and cultural changes and adaptations are important since the survival of these natural resources depends on them. While folklore and religious belief are integral aspects of *devaban* in Kullu today, they are insufficient for their continued survival in changing conditions. Instead these few remnants of a traditional system have managed to adapt and sometimes transform themselves. Understanding these social and cultural adaptations is crucial in understanding the relevance and applicability of traditional knowledge and natural resource management systems in the modern context. For instance, the development of new management systems such as Joint Forest Management committees need to account for changing values and reemerging community linkages in order to become sustainable social institutions.

What emerges from an analysis of the *devata* institution in Kullu is a picture of integration between religious and secular values, a fusion of the traditional and the modern. There can be

little doubt that the local ecology has benefited enormously from this institution, or that this has been the crux of social cohesion and interaction in this society. However the *devata* institutions that exist today are a significantly modern institution in their structure, politics and function. Their very survival depends on this adaptation and metamorphosis. The incorporation of market relations, perception of economic and political benefits from such an organization, adaptation of belief systems and rituals, and introduction of green ideology are all necessary components for the sustainability of these institutions. No generalizations or universal assumptions can be made about the ecological benefits and social equity of traditional or indigenous institutions in present conditions. This needs to be evaluated on a site-specific basis. Kullu *devaban* are an institutional system in a state of constant flux. While this is a state of uncertainty and risk, it is also the condition of potential. Perceiving this institution as a dynamic process, that is a reflection of the integration of traditional and modern systems, provides one a unique opportunity for intervention. This is perhaps its greatest contribution to resource sustainability.

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