

# Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions

Chetan Singh

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This book brings together a range of essays that argue for the complexity of political, economic and social processes among the agro-pastoralists of the Himalayan region. Chetan Singh picks up the gauntlet against discourses of power/knowledge of colonial and post-colonial states that have interpreted their difference from agrarian societies as a sign of “backwardness” on the part of the latter, as well as against the supposedly “sympathetic” historical narrative of Zomia, in which mobile life-ways are celebrated as a form of deep resistance to state society. Instead Singh demonstrates that pastoral communities participate with considerable agency and a high degree of self-reflexivity in complex economic and state-making processes.

Re-appropriating the link between people and environment simplistically presented in state discourses, Singh argues quoting Baker and Gregory that being shaped by mountain landscapes is an act of social and cultural appropriation, through “memory, myth, value and symbolism” (p. 19).<sup>1</sup> The essays amply elaborate the idea that a region is not defined by geographical and linguistic parameters alone but “comes into being” through human interaction with geography and the social construction of identity through language and symbols. Nor, according to Singh, is memory or social value some fixed reified cultural construct. Rather, it is constantly re-negotiated in a rational and deliberate pursuit of self-interest by agro-pastoral communities. Even kinship, in this case polyandry, is not left in the sphere of an archaic social but is interpreted by him as a strategic economic choice.

Singh’s focus is on livelihoods constituted by a mixed portfolio of subsistence strategies including agriculture, transhumant pastoralism and trade. He has discussed the material history of this economy in his previous work,

*Natural Premises*.<sup>2</sup> In the current set of essays his emphasis is more on political economy, the power relations and institutions in which resources are enmeshed and which communities of agro-pastoralists have to negotiate with. Pastures in the highlands and lowlands, for example, did not exist in a non-social space of pure nature but had to be accessed through formal agreements with local residents. These overlapping usages moreover had to be repeatedly re-negotiated over time with communities and the princely states in whose domains they were located.

Trans-Himalayan trade was regulated by formal institutional mechanisms, both state and non-state, in Tibet and in the cis-Himalayas. Engaging with these mechanisms across political, linguistic and cultural boundaries, Singh argues, required cultural skills that some communities like the Kinnauras successfully developed. The strength of highland pastoralists, according to him, was their ability to negotiate the Tibetan and the Hindu brahmanical cultural orders dominating either end of the trade routes and to make deals without compromising their own normative system.

Singh questions the view held by the colonial and post-colonial officials that the agrarian and transhumant economies are incompatible. Pre-colonial rulers he argues understood the symbiotic nature of the relationship and its importance for raising revenues. They therefore regulated potential conflict over resources whereas subsequent regimes have been significantly more hostile towards the claims of mobile people.

These complexities of the political economy suggest that though the social structure of pastoralists was flexible, it was neither as simple nor as opportunistic as James Scott attributed to the highland communities of Zomia. Instead they seem to have worked hard to accumulate and hold on to privileges by negotiating with other communities

and institutions and wherever possible, having them ratified by the local rulers.

While Singh does not entirely dismiss the theoretical construct of Zomia as a non-state space, his chapters on Himalayan polity chronicle a zestful engagement by smaller societies and chieftains with monarchical systems of Himachal. If on the one hand, the 'Dum' represents an ethically informed struggle for autonomy with the state led by the local *deota*, there are many examples of seeking strategic integration with the state on the other. The Kanets of the Kinnaur highlands for example, ensured their dominance over the richer agrarian communities downstream by holding on to two out of three positions of *wazirs* or high-ranking political advisers in the royal state of Bashahar. Singh asserts that while state control was strongly developed along the central river valleys, they had to grant greater autonomy to the *thakurais* or chieftainships of the less accessible valleys and uplands.

The *thakurais* were political formations that preceded monarchical states. Control over local religious cults was crucial in establishing their authority. Singh suggests that the close association of religion with local forms of power in *thakurais* may have compelled monarchies to also develop their hegemony through the strategic use of religion. Following McKim Marriott's formulation of great and little traditions, Singh argues that the Brahmanical pantheon of Vishnu and Shiva or a *kul devi* represented the monarchy while *deotas* representing folk cults were drawn into the ruling pantheon as subordinate deities. Their subjugation was reaffirmed by periodical enactment of rituals of political incorporation such as renewal of feudatory ties and payment of "taxes" by *deotas* to the dominant deity.

In his interpretation of oral narratives then, Singh does not reduce them merely to narratives of political resistance, as the Subaltern Studies have tended to do. Rather he also traces narratives of political integration. Tracing another example of this process through myth, he shows how later versions of the origin stories of two ruling clans conform more closely to the brahmanical paradigms than earlier versions, reflecting the incorporation of local polities into Hindu states. Thus shared notions of political legitimacy evolved between local leaders and princely states and smaller communities came to represent their claims in the language of the world at large.

Singh's discussion of the social largely revolves around village communities and polyandrous marriage. He interprets polyandry as a form that enabled the domestic economy to maximize control over male labour by prohibiting partitioning of the family landholding in each generation. This pooling of labour he argues increased the opportunity for each household to exploit diverse livelihoods. While typically one brother and his wife cultivated the agricultural holding and maintained social obligations in the village community, other brothers could take large flocks to seasonal pastures, with the sheep and goat doubling as pack animals to facilitate Tibetan and cis-Himalayan trade.

However, it is pertinent to ask why then was partitioning among brothers more common than polyandry as a form of marriage across the Western Himalayas. From Himachal across Garhwal and Kumaon to Nepal, even specifically pastoral-trading communities like the Bhotias subscribe to polyandrous marriage. Normative injunctions against polyandry are strong. It may be useful to look beyond forms of marriage, format of the family at practices of work sharing between related households. These practices might well show that the process of economic individuation initiated by partitioning is offset by practices of cooperation and resource sharing between related households to understand that work related mobility could be facilitated through other strategies.

Surprisingly, Chetan Singh's re-interpretation of agro-pastoral history does not draw particularly on fresh primary data from an archive or fieldwork. The essays rely largely on published records, ethnographies and travelogues of the colonial period. Singh is able to read this material insightfully because he has spent years developing a perspective on pastoralism that is absolutely central for the reconstruction of a regional history of the Himalayas.

## Notes

1. Alan, Baker, 'Reflections on the Relations of Historical Geography and the Annales School of History', A.R.H. Baker and D. Gregory eds., *Explorations in Historical Geography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984
2. Chetan Singh, *Natural Premises: Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya, 1800-1950*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998