

Conversation with Chetan Singh

What were the earliest modern works on the history of the region we understand as Himachal today, and what were they about?

Your research in Chhattisgarh must have familiarised you with the problem of writing a conventional history of places where written records are scarce. In Himachal, too, such problems existed. Early researchers initially relied on the few epigraphs inscribed on monuments (especially temples) and on idols or copper-plates. These inscriptions were either land-grants to temples and Brahmins, or recorded the commissioning of idols and masks of gods and goddesses by hill rulers. Some (especially on water fountains) memorialized departed family members of petty chieftains. These sources are unevenly scattered: both in terms of their location and the dates ascribed to them. The largest number belongs to the relatively secluded principality of Chamba. Others were located along the Beas and Satluj rivers and their tributaries. It was a Dutch archaeologist and epigraphist Jean Phillipe Vogel who brought the first collection of inscriptions to light. He published them in 1911 as the first volume of *Antiquities of Chamba State*. The second volume was edited in 1928 by Bahadur Chand Chhabra (also an epigraphist). Occasional inscriptions were also published separately. These were all early steps towards writing a scientific history of the region. Subsequently, a two volume *History of the Panjab Hill States* was jointly authored by Vogel and John Hutchison in 1933. They wrote a separate history for each hill state; and also utilized medieval Persian chronicles, Mughal documents, histories written in Urdu as well as local accounts to write about the later period. Where sources were scarce, they incorporated oral traditions – legends, sagas, folklore – and *vamsavalis*. Hutchison was a medical missionary of the Church of Scotland in the Punjab and resided in Chamba for three decades. He perceived the region's

popular narratives as a kind of folk history. Despite its methodological shortcomings, this approach did facilitate some sort of historical understanding about the region.

Ancient epigraphs and medieval chronicles were primarily political statements. They bore witness to the deeds of rulers and spoke for those who wielded power over state and society. Colonial historians in Himachal were enthused by political affairs and wrote political histories wherever sources were available. However, written sources were limited. But in oral cultures, events that enter and endure in popular memory function as history. Hutchison and Vogel attempted to ferret out historical facts interred in the region's rich oral sources. By the end of the 19th century, British administrators too had recorded numerous folk narratives, legends along with religious beliefs, social practices, and details of caste and culture. Meticulously prepared district and state gazetteers invariably included chapters on local geography and history. They also had sections on flora, fauna, geology, handicraft and other information. This was material that could, and did, change the historiography of the region.

What aspects of Himachal's past have traditionally been of interest to historians, and why?

Conventional political history is what historians in Himachal have attempted to write. The writing of local and regional histories was part of the larger colonial endeavour to understand the people and territories that were annexed or brought under British suzerainty. In comparing 'native' and British rule, colonial officials underscored the importance of continuity in governance. The antiquity and longevity of the hill states evoked particular curiosity. Scholars were initially doubtful whether an inaccessible hill region could have a past noteworthy enough to write about. Others, like Hutchison,

argued that the ancient history of the Himalayan kingdoms was, in fact, more impressive than that of early England and Scotland. Be that as it may, one aspect stands out even in political histories: the unmistakable imprint of landscape and environment.

The striking topography of the region captivated historians. It seemed to shape its society and steer its history. The rugged terrain and scarce cultivable land meant that villages had to be widely scattered. Communities were small and detached but had a clear understanding of village boundaries and their own social identity. Geographical features often demarcated the territories of states. In the fissured mountain landscape of Himachal, more than two dozen chiefdoms thrived and challenged each other over centuries. Colonial historians found it easier to write separate histories for these states. Consequently, a political history of the region as a whole – that incorporated its interlinked economy and shared socio-cultural practices – was never written. It still awaits its author.

British officials and Christian missionaries realised that elements of heterodoxy that created a commonality within the region also differentiated hill society from that of the plains. They had assumed that in the secluded valleys of the Himalaya – presumably untouched by transformations in the subcontinent – they would discover a timeless and unchanged world. They could not have been more wrong. The hills remained connected with the mainstream. Travellers, traders, mendicants and pilgrims had always been frequent visitors. Adventurers, rebels and rascals sought refuge and new opportunities. Brahmins came in search of patronage and livelihood. The mountains were not as isolated as early western scholars had imagined.

What have been your interests in the history of the region and what themes have you pursued?

I think rigid disciplinary divisions do not work very well in places where ideas of history, tradition and folk memory blend into each other and become almost indistinguishable. The lack of reliable historical sources further compounds this problem. One has to make a difficult choice: either concede that no history can be written; or try and write something that comes near to being one. I think the latter is a better option. Every human society has a history even if we disagree on its definition. My interest in, and approach to, the history of the region has been moulded by these circumstances. I initially sought to examine the relationship between ecology and the material life of the Himalayan peasantry, and its impact on the socio-economic history of Himachal.

An occasionally faltering stability between man and nature had long prevailed in the region. However, critical changes in law and administrative rules introduced by the British disrupted this fragile relationship. A period of relentless exploitation of timber and other natural resources followed.

But material life founded on the connection between human communities and their environment reveals only part of the story. Religion and customs, too, exerted an enormous influence. They remain socially relevant and in fact, wield great authority in political issues of rural Himachal even today. My later research attempted to explain how local beliefs, village communities and the larger polity were all entwined. They bolstered the clout of dominant social sections, but also occasionally allowed for a certain amount of flexibility that accommodated change.

In what ways have new concerns begun to change the field?

Contemporary issues invariably influence the work of historians: both in the kind of questions they ask, and in the sources they choose to use. My own work on the region coincided with growing contemporary interest in the environment and realisation of the adverse ecological impact of human activity. Today, scholars ask questions about social structure and village communities in Himachal, as do those who seek to implement development programmes more effectively and equitably. The building of dams and rapid expansion of tourism, too, have given rise to new areas of research. While social scientists, in general, have been engaged in these new fields, the compelling need for a historical perspective has attracted a fair number of historians. Moreover, the emergence of a broad national history over the past several decades has proceeded simultaneously with the construction of regional and sub-regional histories. Regional scholars have contributed importantly to this and, in the process, also to the larger national project.

What has been the role of local and metropolitan history writing for Himachal?

To my mind, the partition of historiography in this manner conceives the existence of inequality in authority and influence between the two. This may be conceptually interesting, but I am not sure how (or if) this really works on the ground. In academic terms, they both overlap. The methodology adopted, the kind of sources used, and also the subjects researched are all fairly similar. Many scholars also easily transcend this divide both in

terms of their work and location. At least, in this limited respect, both kinds of historiography occupy a shared space. There is, moreover, little to suggest that either one of them is overwhelmingly dominant. But it does appear that – for certain reasons – local history writing is well received and better understood within the region.

Surprisingly, local historians have neither critiqued the histories scripted by colonial historians nor written them afresh. The need to re-examine such histories does not appear to be a priority. There has, instead, been a hectic compiling of empirical information on cultural history: tabulating facts about village temples, sculptures and iconography. Religious traditions and practices – especially the centrality of village deities in the socio-cultural life of communities – occupy a central space in this work. However, because this reaffirms the existing views of local communities about their own culture and past, it has popular resonance. Local historiography is not merely rooted in the geography of the region; it is socially linked to the people it portrays. In many ways, local historians are active participants in the creation of a regional identity.

'Metropolitan' historians, on the other hand, have brought in a broader perspective and placed the region's history in a national and even global context. European and American historians researching Himachal have, in recent years, helped start a dialogue that compares the historical experience of mountain societies in different parts of the world. The comparative study of Buddhism is another such area. Scholars have combined theoretical arguments with empirical local knowledge to present new generalizations. This makes it possible to put out explanations with wider applicability. But occasionally, however, the theoretical significance of the 'archive', the 'text' and even the documents takes on a life of its own. This makes geographical location and physical space seem incidental. Such an approach may, possibly, be germane for explorations in the discipline of historiography, but its relevance for the region in which it is empirically situated remains undefined. Gayatri Spivak's much read article about the 'Rani of Sirmur' is, possibly, one such example. Of course, one must also concede that the article is not intended to be a discussion either about a rani in Sirmur, or about a kingdom located in a specific region.

What histories of Himachal would you recommend for laypersons and historians?

The work of Hutchison and Vogel extending roughly till the first quarter of the 20th century is one that both laypersons and historians alike may find interesting. Ironically, almost a century after its writing, it remains among the best researched political histories of the region. Despite its dated nature and many shortcomings, no comparable work on the general history of the western Himalaya has yet replaced it. Nor does any notable scholarly history of the whole region extend the story up to a more recent period. By and large, however, laypersons find religious and cultural questions more appealing. Local historians have responded to this interest, often by uncritically documenting fairs, festivals, village deities, folktales and legends, apart from describing the region's art and architecture.

There is, of course, some outstanding work on religion, state, kingship, pilgrimage, art and architecture done by scholars from the region and from abroad. In fact, significant contributions to Himachal history in recent times have been in the form of specialised studies focusing on defined issues. These include works on hill-stations and urbanization, forced labour (*begar*), family structure and customary practices, trade, forests and environment, impact of hydro-electric projects, etc. Unfortunately, the number of such research publications is not very large. Evidently progress has been rather slow. But, let us add an optimistic note and mention in passing *Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland*, a recent publication of Arik Moran, an Israeli historian. He has combined documentary records with oral tradition and field-work to write short interpretive histories of episodes pertaining to certain parts of Himachal. By bringing together politics, polity, culture, folk religion and the role of hegemonic ideas in society, he has tried to create a larger picture about the entire region. It is, indeed, possible to contend with him on many counts. But his work certainly enriches the historiography of the region. It also, perhaps, represents an interesting mix of local and metropolitan historiography.

(In conversation with Aditya Pratap Deo)