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Divine bonds: Deity worship and community solidarity in Kinnaur

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Abstract

Religion is a communal system characterized by shared beliefs and practices, with a strong emphasis on collective worship. Festivals and rituals serve as key moments to unite the community. Anthropologist Edward Tylor (1871) defined religion as a "belief in supernatural beings," which can include magical forces, angels, or the spirits of deceased ancestors. In the tribal region of Himachal Pradesh, Kinnaur, a blend of Hinduism and Buddhism is evident. Lower Kinnaur predominantly follows Hinduism, with both Middle and Lower Kinnaur featuring a deity system that includes both Gods (Devta) and Goddesses (Devi). Each village has a principal deity, as well as subordinate deities. The principal deity is the supreme figure of the village, while the subordinate deity, known as "Kimshu," serves as the household deity. The principal deity functions as the socio-religious and administrative head of the village and everything is carried out with the deity's consent. Nothing can be done without the deity's approval. Whether starting an economic pursuit, such as trade, or performing ceremonies like marriage, birth, death, or religious festivities, the deity's advice and approval are essential. The unique bond between the deities and the local community fosters a sense of solidarity, with the people of Kinnaur following the deities' guidance with devotion and joy. This bond is a distinctive feature of the Kinnaur's culture. An effort was made to understand the unique bond between the deities and the local community, which plays a vital role in fostering unity and solidarity by guiding daily life, decisions, and cultural practices.

Keywords: Deity, Devta, Devi, Kinnaur, culture and tradition

Introduction

Religion is a communal system, characterized by shared beliefs and practices. It places significant importance on collective worship, with festivals and rituals serving as key moments to unite people. M.N. Srinivas (1978: 202) ^[4], in his study of a Coorg village, describes how celebrations for village deities include activities like a village dance, a group hunt, and a shared meal for the entire community. Durkheim (1912) ^[1] argues that the idea of God is intrinsically tied to society, suggesting that worshipping God is equivalent to worshipping the community itself. He views God as a construct born from human and social experiences, emerging during moments of collective energy or "effervescence" that inspire rituals. Similarly, C. Scott Littleton describes a deity as "a being with powers surpassing those of ordinary humans, engaging with humanity in ways that elevate their consciousness beyond the ordinary concerns of daily life." The idea of supernatural lies at the core of almost every religion. The supernatural refers to entities or forces beyond human understanding, often described as "omnipotent," "infinite," or "extraordinary." Anthropologist Tylor (1871) ^[5] defined religion as a "belief in supernatural beings." This belief can extend to include magical forces, angels, or the spirits of deceased ancestors. These supernatural entities may be organized hierarchically based on their power or categorized according to their specific roles. For example, in Hinduism, the deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are believed to carry out the functions of creation, maintenance, and destruction of the cosmic order, respectively. Despite the supernatural being infinite and beyond human senses, people often attempt to personify it in human form as a means of making it more relatable and understandable (Tylor, 1871) ^[5]. Many believe that supernatural forces or beings can be appeased through specific acts to gain favors or blessings (Durkheim, 1912) ^[1]. Natural disasters or misfortunes are similarly interpreted as manifestations of the supernatural's anger or dissatisfaction (Littleton, 1982) ^[2].

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It is worth noting that supernatural entities are not always portrayed as human-like; they may also take the form of natural forces such as wind, fire, or mountains (Srinivas, 1978) [4].

Beliefs play a fundamental role in acknowledging the existence of the supernatural, the divine, or the sacred. They define the nature of the divine, describe its actions, and prescribe methods for humans to establish communication with it. Beliefs also connect to a sense of the past, emphasizing traditions and long-standing customs. They narrate the historical interactions between the divine and humanity, thereby giving rituals their significance (Tylor, 1871) [5]. Rituals, in turn, are formalized and repetitive acts performed according to custom, often imbued with specific purposes. They serve as symbolic expressions of religious beliefs and are typically standardized, repetitive, and condensed (Durkheim, 1912) [1]. In pre-modern societies, rituals were often elaborate, with intricate details carefully observed to ensure their effectiveness. Rituals may be carried out individually or collectively. In collective contexts, rituals might involve the participation of the entire group or be led by ritual specialists while others observe or assist. Specialists such as shamans, pujaris, or priests play a central role, often reciting lengthy prayers or chants (*Mantras*) while performing ritual actions (Srinivas, 1978) [4].

This study highlights the significant role of religion in shaping the ideological framework that communities continue to uphold. In Lower Kinnaur, people practice a unique blend of religious traditions, predominantly Hinduism and Buddhism, reflecting a common phenomenon in the Himalayan region (Verma, 2002) [6]. In the Nichar sub-division, Hinduism is practiced at both local and regional levels, with strong beliefs centered on the *Devi-Devta* (Deity) complex that influences the region. Similarly, Hinduism is the dominant faith in the western part of the district, while Buddhism prevails in the eastern part of Kinnaur. The coexistence of two religions in Middle Kinnaur can be attributed to historical influences (Sankrityayan, 1948) [3]. Kinnaur's unique geographical position, bordered by regions with differing religious traditions, has significantly shaped its cultural and religious landscape. To the northeast lies Tibet, a prominent seat of Buddhism which has played a vital role in spreading and sustaining Buddhist practices. In contrast, to the southwest is Rampur Bushahar, the former capital of the Bushahar State, which was ruled by Hindu Rajas. The land of Kinnaur was once part of this Hindu state, leading to a significant influence of Hinduism on the local population (Verma, 2002) [6].

The historical shifts in territorial boundaries have contributed to the development and coexistence of these two religions in the region. Physical and ecological barriers have also played a crucial role in maintaining distinct religious practices, though some overlap exists. This overlap has fostered a unique cultural dynamic where people have embraced elements of both religions, reflecting a sense of dual faith. This blending is evident in the reciprocal relationship between ecological settings and religious customs, resulting in an amalgamated form of spiritual and cultural life. The people of Central Kinnaur showcase this duality in their everyday lives, where practices from both Hinduism and Buddhism intertwine harmoniously (Sankrityayan, 1948) [3]. A study was conducted to

document the sacred bond between the tribal community and the deities of the Kinnaura Tribe in Himachal Pradesh, India, highlighting the profound integration of these religious influences in their cultural identity.

Materials and Methodology

In the present study, primary data was collected from villages in the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh during 2021. The tribal district of Kinnaur is divided into three regions: Lower Kinnaur, Middle Kinnaur, and Upper Kinnaur. Lower Kinnaur and Middle Kinnaur predominantly follow Hinduism and practice deity worship, while Upper Kinnaur follows only Buddhism, with no deity worship. The villages selected for this study are located in the Lower and Middle parts of Kinnaur, where Hinduism and deity worship are strongly prevalent. In-depth interviews were conducted, using open-ended questions, with respondents from these villages. Observations were made based on the information provided by the key functionaries of the deities in these villages. Based on these observations, an effort was made to analyze the role of deity worship in enhancing solidarity and regulating social functions in Kinnaur.

Results and Analysis

List of Important Functionaries of Deities

- 1. Deotu:** The Deotu guards the temple and the deity. Selected villagers from each household perform this duty on a rotating basis, usually for three days at a time.
- 2. Chanliya:** Chanliyas are those who carry the deity. On the first and fifteenth days of each month, the deity leaves the shrine, and during these times, the Chanliyas must be present at the temple to carry the deity.
- 3. Mott Mee:** The Mott Mee is responsible for overseeing all the functionaries associated with the deity. Without the Mott Mee, the deity cannot leave the shrine.
- 4. Chene Taye:** The Chene Taye is responsible for carrying all the musical instruments for the deity.
- 5. Saarpala:** Saarpala refers to the day when the deity leaves the shrine. This event occurs twice a month, on the 1st and 15th days, according to the local Vikram Samvat calendar. The observance of Saarpala is generally uniform across Kinnaur.
- 6. Kardars:** Kardars are responsible for the smooth functioning of the temple and the care of the village deity. Their number ranges from 5 to 10, depending on the population of the village and the number of deities in the area.
- 7. Mathas:** The Mathas act as oracles who communicate with the Devta on behalf of the villagers. Their main function is to address the grievances of the villagers by speaking to the Devta.
- 8. Groakch:** The Groakch holds a significant role among the Kardars because this person becomes possessed by the Devta. As an oracle, the Groakch conveys the Devta's will to the villagers.
- 9. Pujaras:** The Pujaras or priest is responsible for performing the daily worship rituals for the Devta in the temple. Sometimes, the Pujaras conducts these rituals once, and at other times, twice a day (Morning and evening). These duties include offering flowers, lighting incense and water to the Devta at sunrise.
- 10. Bajayantri:** The Bajayantri, or musicians, is typically non-rajputs, often from the Koli community. They play

musical instruments every fortnight when the Devta is taken out. Their presence is crucial, as the Devta will not emerge from the shrine or respond to queries if the Baijayantri is not playing the music.

Himachal Pradesh is often referred to as the "Land of Gods and Goddesses" or the "Abode of Gods and Goddesses." The state is home to many deities, as mentioned in Hindu scriptures, with a prominent reference to Lord Shiva, who is believed to reside in the Himalayas. As a result, the people of Himachal Pradesh consider it a sacred place of Lord Shiva. The tribal district of Kinnaur is divided into three regions: Lower Kinnaur, Middle Kinnaur, and Upper Kinnaur. In Kinnaur, people follow both Hinduism and Buddhism, though in some villages, there are families that have recently converted to Christianity. Historically, only Hinduism and Buddhism were practiced here, but Christianity has become more prevalent in recent years. The people of Upper Kinnaur, which includes Hangrang Valley and the upper part of Kinnaur bordering Tibet, predominantly follow Buddhism. In Middle Kinnaur, there is a blend of Hinduism and Buddhism, with people practicing both religions simultaneously. Lower Kinnaur primarily follows Hinduism. In both Middle and Lower Kinnaur, a deity system exists, which includes both Gods (Devta) and Goddesses (Devi). Each village has its principal deity, as well as subordinate deities. The principal deity is the supreme deity of the village, while the subordinate deity, known as "Kimshu," is the household deity. Some villages may have either a Devta or Devi as the principal deity, while others may have both. In certain villages, the Devi is considered the principal or supreme deity.

The body of the Deity, in terms of its external structure, resembles a palanquin. It is built from wooden poles, beams, or planks. The main body rests on a square wooden frame with four legs, covered in expensive cloth and jewelry, giving it a rounded shape. The upper part of the body is adorned with long, thick woolen hair to resemble a head with hair. The entire structure is carried by two individuals, each holding one of two horizontal poles on their shoulders, and they must continue holding it throughout the worship ceremony. Carrying the Devta is a challenging task, as it jerks in different directions up and down or sideways so only strong and well-built individuals are chosen for this role. Both Devta and Devi share similar physical forms, with the Devi being distinguished by special adornments. The Devi is typically decorated with a large gold nose ring (Nath) and a gold hairpin (Chaak), which help identify her as a female deity. In Kinnaur, female deities (Devi) are considered especially powerful. In many villages, the Devi is the primary deity, and in some cases, the Devta is married to the Devi, either within the same village or in others. One respondent who runs a shop in the district headquarters of Reckong Peo stated,

"There are many goddesses or devis as chief deities in the villages. One of the most powerful female deities, Maa Durga from Kothi village in Reckong Peo, is the head and supreme devi of ten villages. She is considered the supreme devi of the entire Reckong Peo region. Reckong Peo is the district headquarters of Kinnaur and has the largest market in the district. Many people from outside Kinnaur live there for business. Maa Durga from Kothi village often visits the market and makes important decisions related to it. If any shopkeeper faces a problem, they directly visit Maa Durga

to resolve it. People from outside Kinnaur also acknowledge her power and worship her. Similarly, Chitkul Devi of Chitkul village, Usha Devi of Nichar, and Durga of Ropa Valley are some of the main deities of their respective villages and are considered to be very powerful."

In Kinnaur, the indigenous deities are revered as incarnations or forms of the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses. According to tradition, all the deities take a temporary respite in heaven during the most sacred month of the year. Before departing for heaven, the deity reveals detailed predictions and prophecies for the upcoming year. The deity provides an overview of all the auspicious and inauspicious events that will occur during the year, as well as predictions about the amount of snowfall and rain. The deity also provides a comprehensive list and details of all the festivals, fairs, and significant events observed throughout the year, at the outset of the year. The principal deity is the socio-religious and administrative head of the village and everything is done with the deity's consent. Nothing can be done without the deity's approval. For starting an economic pursuit, like trade, or any special ceremony, such as marriage, birth, death, or any religious festivity, the deity's advice and approval are essential. The village deity's approval is necessary for marriage ceremonies. The date and month of the boy's marriage are decided by the village deity. Only at the boy's marriage is the village deity invited to perform religious rituals and to protect the groom's house from negative energies. In some villages, even at the girl's marriage, the village deity is taken to the bride's house, but mostly, it is only at the boy's marriage that the deity is invited.

However, the village deity is very protective of the girls. Before deciding on the marriage of a girl, the village deity is asked for permission. If the deity foresees misfortune in the future, the marriage proposal is canceled. In many cases, the village deity instructs the groom's family to gift land or cash in the name of the bride for her future. The deities of the villages are considered very powerful, and therefore, girls who marry into other villages feel secure and are not humiliated in their in-laws' homes. In this way, the village deity protects the girls even after their marriages. In addition to these responsibilities, the deity is deeply concerned with protecting the village from ghosts, demons, evil spirits, and other negative forces. The deity is seen as the highest authority in the village, overseeing the lives of the villagers. To ensure favorable outcomes, such as timely rain, good harvests, or other blessings, the villagers regularly appease the deity. When there is a lack of rain or snow, the deity is believed to be the one who can resolve the issue and bring the needed precipitation. Likewise, in times of excessive rain or flooding, the deity is thought to control the situation and prevent harm. The villagers trust that their deity, whether Devta or Devi, is generally benevolent and will bless them during challenging times. One villager shared a personal experience:

"One day, while I was driving, my car's tire suddenly veered off the road, and I was left shaken. In a panic, I shut my eyes tightly. Then, I felt an unexplainable force lift my car back onto the road. Afterward, I sought guidance from the Buddhist monk in our village, who told me that the village deity, Devta ji, had intervened to protect me. Our deity always watches over us and keeps us safe from harm." If the deity is not properly appeased, he may become angry and, in his wrath, allow evil spirits to afflict the people with

epidemics and other calamities. It is believed that these evil spirits dwell in the hills and treetops, occasionally disrupting the peace. To protect themselves, people seek refuge under the care of their village deities. A common practice to ward off the negative influence of these spirits is to propitiate the Devta and Devi.

In Kinnaur, every household has its own deity, called 'Ghar Ka Devta' or Kimshu, in addition to the village deity. This household deity governs the family members of the household in which he is enshrined. All family members are required to worship the household deity, offering prayers and offerings during various festivals and fairs. The Kimshu is typically kept in the kitchen or granary (Kuthar) of the house. While women can also offer worship to the household deity, they are traditionally forbidden from entering the sanctum during their menstrual cycle. Girls, until they reach puberty, are allowed to enter the deity's and Kimshu's premises. Unlike the village deity, the Kimshu does not have a fixed structure; instead, it is represented by any object believed to be possessed by Kimshu, and worship is offered to that object. The pattern of worship for Kimshu differs as well. Usually, the head of the household performs the worship on behalf of the other members of the family, although both men and women can offer prayers to Kimshu. Just as the village deity is worshipped during fairs and festivals, the household deity is similarly honored.

In addition to the village and household deities, there are also many invisible or underground deities in Kinnaur villages that are considered significant. These deities are believed to inhabit sacred places such as water sources, rivers, forests, and mountains, and people are generally forbidden from visiting these sites. If someone accidentally trespasses on these sacred locations, purification rituals are required to restore their sanctity. These divine entities are integral to the spiritual and cultural life of Kinnaur's villages. The local deities in Kinnaur are closely connected to Hindu gods and goddesses, considered to be manifestations of them. Therefore, before any worship takes place, the Kailash Puja (worship of Lord Shiva) and Kali puja are of immense importance. During village festivals, these pujas are performed before any other rituals. In all Kinnaur villages where deities are venerated, Hindu practices and traditions are widely observed.

In addition to Hinduism, Buddhism also holds a significant presence in Kinnaur. While Buddhism is deeply rooted in the upper region of Kinnaur, many villages in the lower region continue to practice it. Some villages have both deity temples and Buddhist monasteries, reflecting the coexistence of both faiths. Besides Hinduism and Buddhism, there are also several smaller religious groups and sects in Kinnaur, illustrating the diversity of religious beliefs within the broader framework of Hinduism in the region. Despite the presence of various religions, local deities play a central role in Kinnaur, particularly in villages where they are revered. In these villages, local deities are considered the primary guardians and most important spiritual entities, holding a key position in the community's social and cultural life. All socio-cultural activities in these villages revolve around the deity. The deity resides in a temple known as a *Santhang*. No one is allowed to enter the temple in the presence of the deity unless they wear a cap and tie a thread around their waist. A number of functionaries are assigned to the temple to manage its administration. The deity selects a team of workers, usually

every two or three years, to oversee the temple's functions. The administration of the temple is under the control of the upper-caste people, primarily the rajputs. Functionaries are chosen based on their lineage, with specific duties assigned accordingly. The lineage with a higher social standing often assumes more significant roles in the temple's administration. Some functionaries also receive land from the deity for agricultural purposes. As long as a family has a member serving as a functionary of the deity, the family benefits from various privileges, including remuneration and access to the deity's land. It is believed that the more important the role assigned to a person by the deity, the higher the social standing of their lineage. In Kinnaur, only rajputs are allowed to lift the palanquin of the deity. Groups such as the kolis, lohars, carpenters, and goldsmiths considered untouchables are prohibited from touching the deity and are relegated to a lower level of functionaries known as Bajjantris (musicians). However, their presence is essential during all rituals. Without them, the village deity cannot be properly invoked. Some functionaries are compensated for their services with remuneration from the temple.

Each month, for two days the beginning and the end of the month the village deity is brought out of the temple and awakened. During these two days, villagers gather before the deity to present their problems and sorrows, seeking solutions. If any issue is anticipated to affect the village, the deity is invoked to resolve it. Residents from other villages also visit the temple on these days to seek the deity's guidance and resolutions for their own issues. The village deity is also responsible for overseeing the village affairs. Major decisions in the village are made by the deity, and the villagers are bound to follow all of the deity's decisions. Villagers are required to participate in all fairs and festivals. One member from each family must attend every fair and festival. If a family fails to attend, a heavy fine is imposed. If a family completely neglects deity worship and does not participate in the fairs and festivals, the village deity punishes the family. The family member may fall ill, or misfortune may strike the household. In such cases, the family must comply with the rules of the village and the deity.

In this way, the deities serve as the heads of the villages, playing a crucial role in uniting the community. During times of crisis, villagers turn to the deities for guidance, and the deities help alleviate their troubles. Whether in the face of natural calamities or personal struggles, the deities are revered and sought after for protection. This reverence extends beyond village boundaries, ensuring the safety of villagers wherever they go. Kinnaur's fairs and festivals revolve around the deities, fostering a deep connection between the divine and the locals. These celebrations unite the people, strengthening the bonds between the deities and the villagers. The people of Kinnaur follow the guidance of the deities with devotion and joy, showcasing a unique bond that is particular to Kinnaur. This connection not only fosters unity but also contributes to preserving the region's distinctive cultural heritage.

Conclusion

In the tribal region of Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, deities play an essential role in village life. The village deity governs all local affairs, creating a sense of unity among the villagers. Various fairs and festivals are centered on the

village deity, and these events hold significant cultural importance. The festivals showcase the rich traditions of Kinnaur, with men and women wearing traditional attire to honor their heritage. The village deity also upholds ethical values, moral principles, and the continuity of traditional beliefs within the community. Any disputes whether family-related, land-related, or otherwise are settled by the deity. The deity holds a powerful position in the village, playing a key role in strengthening community ties. Revered as both the village leader and protector, the deity fosters a sense of togetherness and helps preserve the ancient cultural practices of Kinnaur. The spiritual connection between the people and their deities has remained resilient in the face of modernization. Preserving and acknowledging this bond is crucial, as it is fundamental to the social fabric of Kinnaur.

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