

Devta Institution of Himachal: A Sociological Study

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The state of Himachal Pradesh is also known as 'Dev Bhoomi' which means abode of Gods and Goddesses. In fact its peculiarities have been responsible for the grant of statehood to this land. Shri M. B. Lall stated in this context that Himachal Pradesh has been granted statehood neither because of its size nor due to its population but because of the need to preserve the distinct socio-cultural identity and heritage of its people. Many sporadic efforts have been made by the people belonging to different walks of life to write about Himachal Pradesh. Its understanding in right perspective needs deep insights into the distinct way of life of its inhabitants mainly in upper part of Shimla, especially the centuries old peculiar institution of Devta and Devi maintained in the villages. Almost every village has a temple housing village or clan deities locally known as Devi and Devta. These predominant cultural characteristics, typical of the area today, have their origins today in the Vedic periods, provided by Aryans. The attention towards the great research potential in this area was drawn even long back by Anthropological Congress held in 1972 remarking that whatever work has been done so far in Himachal's economy, socio-cultural aspects is so scanty, sporadic and sketchy that no specific conclusions can be drawn. Moreover, Himachal's religious institutions and modes of worship have altogether been ignored. From the news item (*The Tribune*, 1992) it can be observed that actual field of study remains a question mark as this state seems to have been identified important only as a tourist resort and not in terms of its religio-cultural aspects.

WHAT IS DEVTA?

In general, the Hindus in the hills of Himachal Pradesh worship lord Rama, Krishna and Shiva with reverence. Of all Shiva however remains the presiding deity. Though

people are bound together by the common religion and Gods, yet they differ in terms of religious observance. This is due to the fact that a vast majority of Hindus are also devoted to their particular traditional Gods including the family deity, a peculiar practice in vogue in the area under study, Theog in Himachal Pradesh. Whether the deity is God, a hero, a *Rishi* or otherwise is called a Devta. He to the subjects signifies the Almighty, all pervasive and the most powerful supernatural being. He is the protector, saviour and the one who brings about prosperity to His subjects. Devtas are represented in the form of idols. They are believed to be endowed with supernatural powers which brings about prosperity and well being when pleased and calamities or sufferings in case displeased. Devta speaks through oracle system which is a medium of divine revelation. The system of Devta is like the one which was also followed by Greeks and Latin deities. Under this system Devta speaks through a man called 'Devan' meaning 'I am Devta' when the spirit of the former enters in the latter. The oracle system operates both within the shrine premises or any other place fixed by Devan or the subjects for the purpose of hearing His wisdom on the questions raised by subjects or their collectivity. The present paper centres around Devta Chikhreshwar enshrined at village Chikher – a panchayat headquarter in the Theog development block in district Shimla. The village Chikher is situated at the distance of four kilometers from Theog town. The shrine of Devta is located in the centre of village. It is approximately 400 years old. Many idols of Devta are placed in this shrine. Devta Chikhreshwar is also templed at His second shrine situated in village Jango on Kotkhaj-Jubbal Road, at the distance of about one kilometer from Theog town. This is said to have been constructed about 250 years ago to facilitate the subjects of Devta Chikhreshwar hailing from far of places.

In order to understand and explore some of the salient features of the institution of Devta, a prototype of God

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and religious institution, it becomes important to examine:

First, it is summed up that like any social phenomenon in general and religion in particular, the institution of Devta must have had socio-mythological origin. The following queries are essential in this context:

- (a) What does the institution of Devta mean?
- (b) How do subjects perceive and what do they think about it?
- (c) How did this institution come into being?
- (d) How has it been perpetuating itself generation after generation?

Second, being an institution, Devta also has an organised existence. Some of the significant questions therefore are:

- (a) What type of organisational structure this institution has?
- (b) What are the sources of mobilisation of the subjects?
- (c) What makes people to adhere to this institution of Devta?

Third, to understand the functional aspect of this institution, some of the questions worth exploring are:

- (a) What are major functions of the institution of Devta?
- (b) Does there arise intra-groups rivalry?

OVERVIEW OF STUDY AREA

Theog, is described as gateway to main Shimla, one of the eight tehsils and three sub-tehsils comprising district Shimla. Geographically, Theog lies between 32°—22° 40' to 30° 12' 40" North latitude and 75° 47' 55" to 79° 04' 20" East longitude. The other development blocks of Shimla and other districts of Himachal Pradesh viz. Kinnaur, Kullu, Lahaul Spiti, Solan, Sirmour etc. also have institutionalized system of Devi or Devta governance. The total population of Theog block is 78254 (census 2001). There are as many as forty shrines of Devta to govern their subjects. Devta Chikhreshwar had been dominant in the erstwhile Theog state. The people living in six out of eleven *parganas* (territorial part of state) and one *pargana* of Madhan princely state comprise the subjects of Devta including the *Raja* of Theog who recognises Devta Chikhreshwar as his *gaddi's isht* (throne deity). This Devta is *kulisht* (clan deity) of *Raja* of erstwhile Madhan princely state. The subjects of Devta are spread over in various panchayats of Theog block.

The state economy in general and that of Shimla district in particular continues to be dependent on the agricultural sector as compared to national economy as

a whole. It is worthwhile to mention that large percentage of population is engaged in government service. It will not be wrong to say that even those working in government sector also have agriculture land. In some cases the land holdings are large enough to make one's government job as secondary. Those who are employed in government sector also actively engage themselves in agricultural operations.

The agricultural activities are carried out with traditional and modern techniques. Most of the agricultural work is done by members of the family themselves. Almost all the agricultural activities are carried out by women and men who are associated with heavy works like ploughing or carrying heavy weights. The people of the low castes and migrant labour of Nepal perform labour activities in the fields. The area has taken big strides in horticultural development and cultivation of season vegetables. People, in large numbers enjoy better housing, clothing, sanitary conditions, health status and educational facilities. The modern education has not deterred the people from their traditional following of Devi and Devta despite the fact that the literacy rate or the academic education of the followers of Devta Chikhreshwar are quite high. A few people have doctorate degree and many of them occupy administrative, bureaucratic and technocratic positions in Government of India and Himachal Pradesh.

INSTITUTIONALISATION OF DEVTA

If Himachal is '*Dev Bhoomi*' then India can rightly be called as home and abode of religions. The religious history of the world tells us that from time immemorial, India has been the home of great sages, seers and saints. All the grand religious ideas that have moulded the character of man, the loftiest of ethics and morality that have raised human being to magnanimous heights, divine splendor and all the sublime truths of spirituality that have made man divine and have moulded the spiritual ideas of nations and saviours of mankind, first arose in India. The spiritual horizon of India has always been illuminated with the glory of the self – effulgent sun of wisdom of *Upanishad*.

In Indian context 'religion' can not explain '*Dharma*'. However in the Indian religious system, especially those having roots in Vedic religion project certain peculiar features of their own. *Dharma* has been used interchangeably by scholars. It implies 'moral order', 'moral obligation', 'moral duty' which means the way of life as a whole which embodies all the socio-economic and cultural pursuits of mankind. It is evident from the idea of four *purusharthas* that is *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and

Moksha, all the four are being interconnected or interlinked to realise the highest end i. e. *Moksha*. It is here that in Indian context we can not separate philosophy, ethics and religion which is intricately woven together.

The primitive foundation of Hinduism was in part of Indo-European origin, content was largely indigenous or modified on spot. The roots of the theistic Indian system can be easily traced back in Vedic religion which embodies all the features of tribal religion. The Aryan tribe which invaded India during the second millennium brought with them a body of religious beliefs which was already well organised. The Aryan religion turned Indo-European on Indian soil, had already been shifted out during the so called Indo-Iranian intermediary period. At the end of the period separation occurred between the original religion of Iran and what was to become Vedic religion in North-West India.

The succession of influence made Hinduism a religion quite different from that of Aryan invaders. The main stages of development were the appearance of great philosophical speculation and the fixation of *Smriti* (at the beginning of Christian era), the first fragmentation into sect (first and second centuries A.D.) the appearance of *bhakti* (600-800 A.D.) and Tantrism (since 800 A.D.). The main outlines of all these movements exist, however as early as Vedic period. After Vedic period the rituals and ceremonies which were of great importance fell into disuse. Their modern reflection were purely archaeological demonstrations. The importance of external practices increased.

Unknown in ancient period, the cult of idol gained momentum with the development of iconography. Worship or Puja remained as the central point of religious activity. The rite consists of welcoming the God as a distinguished guest, bathing the God, dressing Him, adorning Him, feeding, putting flowers around Him, worshipping Him with moving flames accompanied by devotional songs.

The other peculiar feature of Indian religious systems has been its pluralistic character. Among Hindu Gods, the most important are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The last two alongwith goddess *Shakti* are highly worshipped in the Himalayan region. Shiva occupies a special place and is worshipped both as a God of creative energy and as a power which frequently emerges as protector deity, saving the people from their enemies and natural disasters. Though monotheistic tendencies are also found in historical development of Indian religion i. e. Advaita, Vedanta etc. yet pluralistic tendency has been the dominant feature of religious systems.

Religious system in the Himalayas as pointed out earlier has most of the deities, the product of Shaivism

and Vaishvanism. The origin can be traced back in these two systems yet the deities in Himalayas have some peculiar features of their own. The institution of Devi or Devta which is highly prevalent in upper part of Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh is a system of governance of day to day chores of life. In order to make sequential study of this institution especially in the absence of any record and literature, one has to retreat to the Pre-Harrapan Age, archaeological antiquities of Shaiv cult.

Orthodox Hinduism in the Himalayas has been of late origin. As the rulers in the hills are believed to have come from the plains, they brought current of religion and made them popular in Himalayas. During the Mauryan period as preserved in the records of Ashoka, he built stupa at Kuluta perhaps this may have been done as a step to propagate Buddhism in the Himalayan countries. The Hemvata school of the Theravadin may have had its origin in the Himalayas where Buddhism gained foothold as a result of missions sent during the time of Ashoka. Probably during the same period some form of early Hinduism had penetrated in this region. Panini's knowledge of *Trigarta*, its ecology and some parts of its political growth indicate that people of region had faith in Vedic religion and rituals. They performed number of sacrifices which are mentioned in the early and late Vedic literature. It is evidenced not only by early coins found in this part but also by an epigraphic fact which mentions a clan of Brahmins who preserved *Atharvan* traditions of Vedic knowledge and learning even in seventh century A.D. in Kullu (Himachal Pradesh).

Narmanda copper plate (7th century A.D.) mentions a grant of land to a temple and its priests who taught the *Atharvaveda*. Similarly, it testifies to the growth of Shaivism, Tantric elements of *Shakti* cult the earliest traces of which are found in the Indus valley culture, which has extended up to the foot hills of the western Himalayas. It is believed that the cult of Shaivism was made popular sometimes near the eleventh century A.D. onwards as also described by Pope.

Devta has many characteristics similar to Shaivism. Devta idol symbolises Shiva power (*Shakti*) in the villages of Himalayas which is protector and savior of people. It is now with the passage of time that Devta has come to be worshipped as family, clan and village deity.

ORIGIN OF DEVTA CHIKHRESHWAR

From sociological perspective deity could be interpreted as western effort to open a broader horizon than that of a monotheistic God, but without breaking continuity with God. The concept of deity denotes both the communicable and most exclusive aspect of the 'divine' reality. 'Deity

appears only in the highest performance thinking'. It must be kept in mind at the very outset that discourse about deity is unique as its locus is beyond both the things of the senses and the things of the intellect. Deity or Devta may not only denote God or Gods as substantial beings but also may be used as a generic name connoting all those forces, energies, entities, ideas, powers and the like that come from above or beyond the human realm. For some scholars the notion of deity or Devta has been the result of an inference of some type of causal thinking. Deity is then a supreme being or beings of a celestial or other type. The human question about the origin of life, the world and the like triggers the search for a cause that will be located whatever place appears to be more appropriate for a dwelling of a supreme being or beings whether in heaven or on the earth. The other would see the origin of deity not so much in the intellectual quest as in external anxiety of the human being facing elementary mysterious happenings of life and nature. There may be others who have in the search for deity as based neither on causal thinking nor on anxious feeling, but on simple awareness. It is in this context that the origin of Devta is explained.

It is through *shruti* and *smriti* (heard and memory) that the tale of the origin of Devta is handed down to the next generation in each family of His subjects. The origin of Devtas as is generally narrated by people in general and interviewees in particular can be traced to the most peculiar rather strongest event. It is believed that there lived a woman in a village called *Tikkeri* who used to tend the cattle of the villagers. One of her cows used to graze a particular herb locally known as *chhamber*. Everyday the cow used to urinate at the spot. As a consequence the herb would grow in the next morning. This continued for along time and the woman was fed up with this repeated activity of the cow. She thought of a plan to get rid of this herb and cow's daily routine. She took up *chikhdi* (implement for digging) to uproot that *chhamber* herb. As she stuck at the root of the herb she turned into a stone. After learning about the incident the villagers went to the spot and found also two idols unearthed at the spot. The idols were made of the mixture of eight metals. The pointed end of that digging implement damaged the noses of two idols which are still apparent. The stone (woman turned into) is still placed in the temple premises used for permitting the cow's milk to be used by the subjects after first lactation period of the cow.

The idols of Devta were brought from the spot to the village now known as Chikher (named after digging implement *chikhdi*) and the Devta known as Chikhreshwar. Thereafter a temple was constructed and idols were enshrined there. The people believe that these

idols existed prior to its digging event and were buried at the spot by the then inhabitants from the fear of being taken away presumably during the Mughal regime. The idols being found by the woman on her turning into a stone was miracle to the villagers and their conviction of supernatural power strengthened as governing force of their social, religious and cultural life.

ORGANIZATION OF DEVTA

The institution of Devta like any other institution has specific objectives to fulfill. It has organisational set up based on traditions and convictions which are unwritten for centuries. According to people's belief, this is one of the institutions which has been performing most of the indispensable functions for the subjects thereby contributing to their social existence. Though this institution appears to be similar to temples in plains or elsewhere in the world yet its characteristics make it different from other. Besides its functions it also differs in the structure of the temple in which Devta is installed. The top of the temple has concave structure. Wherever Devta shrines are located, population of that area is denser than other villages. The temple represents the highest building and is conspicuously located. The idols installed in temples have particular names. The idols are up to waist and are made of eight metals in definite proportion known as *Ashatdhatu*. The idols appear to be made of gold. These idols of Devta Chikhreshwar are installed in three temples. There are more than forty idols installed in Chikher, Janog and Jhageri temples.

To worship in congregation and pay visits to temples as is in the case of other religious places do not have much significance as far as the faith of their subjects is concerned. What matters is the degree of internalisation of Devta. The prime faith of His subjects is that He regulates and controls everything concerning their life including diseases, production in fields, progeny of subjects, possession of wealth, advent of calamities, disasters etc. Faith is not an abstract matter for the believers but it is its materialisation in realities. The people emphatically state the personal experiences they had in their respective homes and families. The violation of any of the norms of this institution leads people to suffer from unnatural disasters, calamities, loss of wealth and prevention of production of progeny etc. and on offering penalties (locally known as *dand*) all problems can vanish.

The most glaring examples are those of madness which could not be cured by the highest medical institutes or asylums for the insanes, but their cases were cured after the families paid penalties for their wrong doings to

village or clan deity. The natural calamities like hailing or lightening are also prominent examples of suffering to those who do not tread the path laid down by the institutional norms. The appearance of devil spirits in dreams or otherwise in the form of leopards, snakes, naked women and monsters are very common in those cases who do not follow the norms of Devta.

DEVTA AS DEMOCRAT, PROTECTOR OR SAVIOUR

Devta is vested with legislative, executive and judicial powers. The area ruled by Devta is considered as the oldest surviving democratic system in the world (TOI, 2008). In earlier times, all the matters and disputes were decided by Devta only but now when there is court of laws equally functional in society subjects have the option to follow either of the two institutions. But it is very clear that there is no overlapping or interference of Devta in court of laws or vice-versa. It is left up to the subjects whom they wish to refer their case to. But subjects have more faith in supreme power i. e. Devta as His judgment is not influenced by physical, psychological, and evidences but He has His own super power to arrive at any judgment. Devta is impartial. He abandons all forces of influences of a person therefore He does not only decide the cases but always delivers justice.

The Devta institution possesses all the essential features of a state i. e. sovereignty, population, territory and citizenship. Like British constitution Devta has unwritten constitution based on traditions and conventions which are known as *cars* and *antars* in local dialect. Any person can migrate to the territory of Devta and become subject of Devta. In that case all the territorial norms of Devta will be applicable to him but as an individual he will remain a subject of Devta from where a person has migrated. The same is applicable to a person who emigrates from the territory of this Devta. All the traditions and conventions which have been in vogue since long time are in accordance with the decisions taken by general house unanimously.

FUNCTIONS OF DEVTA INSTITUTION

Most of the activities of the people of area under the governance of Devta are governed by Him. This institution performs all functions which are done by other religious institutions. Some of the key functions of this institution are like governance of harmonious activities in the lives of His subjects, socialisation and He regulates the activities, distribution of natural resources like water, land and forests, deliverance of justice, the fulfillment of having direct perceptual relationship with supernatural

being, attainment of contentment by direct relationship with each subject being as his or her family deity. Besides, this institution also has its latent functions such as helping human beings to satisfy their quest for a relationship with the spiritual or metaphysical forces.

Devta acts as sovereign ruler. The obligations of a ruler in traditional society are all performed by Devta. The judgments pronounced by Him are final and binding on the subjects. The institution also has its own revenue sources which includes grains, cash, gold, silver etc. gathered in the form of offerings and also from penalties. In Kullu and Shimla regions, the *raja* alienated almost fifty per cent of the cultivated land to temples or *deotas* (Devtas) as endowment in perpetuity. The British allowed this tenure to continue, with the accepted theory that a *raja* divested himself proprietorship in favour of the *deota*. The cultivators of such land paid rent/share to the temples and did not have proprietary right over the land they cultivated (Mehta, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Basically, all religions of the world, whether primitive, ancient or contemporary are intimately concerned with man's place in nature and his quest for a meaningful existence which takes varied forms and approaches. One of the most prominent conceptions of religion to most of the scholars has been individualistic phenomenon dealing with one's mere belief and faith in the supernatural. This implies that religion concerns basically with humanity, humanism, moral ethics and all those things which can be functional to individual existence. This functional aspect of religion can be spiritually described as a medium of unification and harmony between man and God. But existence of religion in organised form makes religion more or less a coherent system of beliefs and practices. The basic concern here has been with the supernatural order of being, forces, places or other entities: a system that for its adherents has implications both at the behavioural and social level. In modern times with the realisations of crucial importance of social context under which all thinking takes place, the social aspect of religion has shot into prominence. Today the concern of religion is not only liberation and life in heaven but more importantly, it is concerned with social welfare, social relations and social cohesion.

Devta institution being a socio-religious institution can be understood on the same line of analysis on which religion can. Devta institution commensurates with both the functional and supernatural aspects of religion. Most of the activities of the people are guided by this institution. Like the past, the commandments of Devta

are thoroughly believed as a source of harmony between man and supernatural for smooth running of life. The perpetuation of this traditional socio-religious institution even today when various forces of change are operating in society clearly shows the faith and adherence to this very institution.

No deterrence after centuries indicates firm faith of subjects in Devta. Sure, in an ever changing world, it is best to hang on to some beliefs that do not change and to have faith in some constants.

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