

The Village Commons of a Mountain Tribe in the Himalayas: Evidence from Kinnaur District of Himachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract

Traditional mountain societies are characterized by their symbiotic relationships with nature. Living in harsh environments, these peoples have to rely on natural resources and an array of practices which they have devised through trial and error through the ages. Their holistic view of their ecosystem results in diversified and dynamic strategies that are well adapted to both their natural environment and culture. Therefore, these peoples can be seen as guardians of the common resources around them. They procure and maintain such resources in accordance with their particular cultural edicts. This paper is based on ethnographic data collected from the village of Jangi in Kinnaur District of India's Himachal Pradesh province, and documents how villagers are able to sustain themselves through the religious intervention of the Deota (deity) Committee and the "Village Gram Sabha," which regulate the water supplies for fields and distribute the forest's dry fruits. The paper combines economic and cultural factors to analyze how traditional societies today use their sustainable practices to enhance their chances of survival in the harshest of conditions. It also enlightens readers about how women are distributors of knowledge in a mountain ecology, thus enabling future generations to survive well.

Keywords: Mountain Ecology; Village Commons; Women

Introduction

Mountain ecosystems present some of the harshest environmental conditions for human survival. Hence, it is imperative for cultures in them to develop a symbiotic relationship with them. Traditional mountain societies have co-evolved with their environments, modifying nature, but also actively maintaining it in a diverse and productive state based on their ancient indigenous knowledge and socio-cultural practices (Gadgil and Berkes, 1991; Ramakrishnan, 1998; Zingari, 1997, 1998). Their holistic view of their ecosystems results in diversified and dynamic strategies that are well adapted to both their natural environment and their cultures. These peoples can be seen as guardians of the common resources around them, and hence their procurement and maintenance is done in accordance with their local cultural edicts (Jodha, 1990; 1992; 1997). Their village commons are of special importance for peoples inhabiting the mountain regions of the world. Because of the meager sizes of operational holdings and poor infrastructure facilities, village commons directly or indirectly play an important role in enhancing and stabilizing income by providing multiple products. This makes the mountain peoples using them guardians of their common resources. They procure and maintain them in accordance with their local cultural mechanisms (FAO,1995)

Anthropological studies have provided ample evidence showing the vital role of cultural mechanisms in resource management, such as various forms of common ownership of lands and their transfer, which create a balance or an imbalance between resources, local communities, population growth and mountain economies (Cole and Wolf, 1974; Netting, 1981; Viazzo, 1989; Zingari, 1996). Given the village commons's sustainable nature, this paper will examine how the people of the village of Jangi Khas in Kinnaur district of India's Himachal Pradesh province use their commons by analyzing some practical examples.

Geographical Coordinates of Kinnaur District, Himachal Pradesh, in the Western Himalayas

The district of Kinnaur is situated in the northeastern part of Himachal Pradesh province. This secluded, rugged and mountainous Himalayan district covers both sides of the Sutlej River. According to one source, “the global coordinates of Kinnaur are between 31° - 05' -55” and 32° - 05' - 20” north latitude, and 77° - 45' - 0” and 79° - 00' - 50” east longitude. It is about 50 miles in length and about 40 miles in breadth. Its total area is 6401 sq. km, and the district headquarters is located at Rekong Peo” (Bhatt, 1997).



[From Census Handbook, (1991) 'Himachal Pradesh - Kinnaur District', New Delhi: Office of Registrar General Census Division]

The Study Village - A Profile

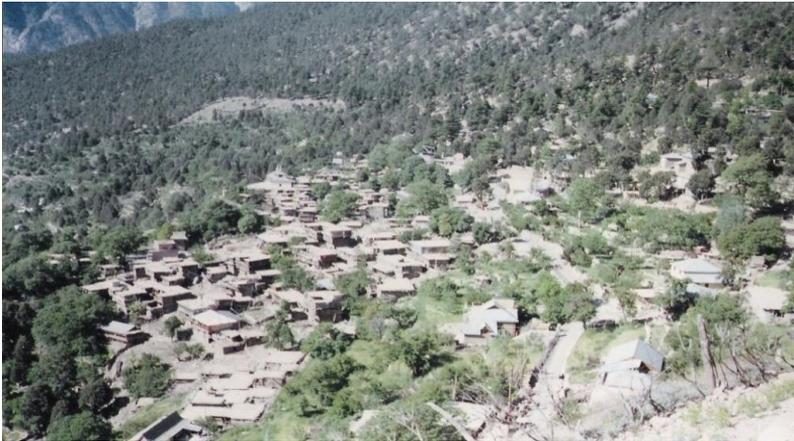
The village of Jangi lies about 21 km northeast of Rekong Peo (the district headquarters), on the right bank of the Sutlej River. Its altitude is nearly 2790 meters above mean sea level. The village is approachable by a link road connecting it with National Highway No. 22 near the village of Rarang. This highway runs north to Poo. Khabo (2831 meters) is at the confluence of the Sutlej and the Spiti Rivers, and the highway follows the Spiti, while the Sutlej disappears to the east towards the Tibetan border. Nako, Chkola, Leo and Chango Uperia are some of the villages along the highway. Sunmdo is the last village in Kinnaur, and is located at the divide between Hangrang and the Spiti Valley. The route has been nationalized, and the Himachal Pradesh government buses ply it for the convenience of the district's tribal population, government officials and visitors. The link road connecting Jangi to National Highway No. 22 also connects Rarang and Lippa villages; Rarang comes first on the way to Jangi, while Lippa is the last village on the link road.

The village is situated nearly 500-600 meters above the newly constructed highway. The villagers have developed a convenient trail, or shortcut, to the highway, and also to Morang village (opposite Jangi). Earlier, the villagers had to use the link road, which took much time, but now moving down this trail reduces the time to Morang by three hours. However, this trail is very steep, almost vertical, and tough to climb. This shortcut was constructed by the Gram Panchayat under the Block Development Scheme.

The village is congested, and is situated on a mountain slope, giving it the appearance of a terrace settlement. Although Jangi appears to be a single unit, social stratification is quite evident, as the village is divided in two parts--lower and the upper--along the link road. The two major social groups among the Kinnaurese are the Khosia and the Beru; the former division only includes Rajputs, while the latter consists of four

artisan castes, namely the Lohar, the Badhai, the Koli and Nangalu. Although, the Nangalu (basket makers) can be found in other parts of Kinnaur District, they are non-existent in this village.

Plate I



Pic No. 1.0 The Study Village: Jangi [Taken by author]



Pic.No. 1. 1 The Study Village: Jangi [Taken by author]

The Beru are further divided into two sub-divisions, namely the Domang and the Chamang. While the former includes Lohar and Badhai, the latter includes only Koli. The Rajputs, or Khosia, being higher socially, have their houses on the upper portion of the slope, while the Chamang and Domang occupy the lower tier of the village (Raha, 1974; 1978).

Jangi is not just a physical space, or a settlement of a group of people. The social life here is organized along definite ritual and secular principles, such as caste, kinship, economy, politics and religion, which are covered in other sections of this paper. The physical character of this village is influenced by its dynamic interaction with these patterns and principles. Its horticultural and agricultural lands, pastures, wooded areas, Khuls (water channels), open spaces, cremation ground, streets and lanes provide a setting for both private and public construction of homes, granaries and temples. Thus, for the villagers on the whole, their home is where the hearth is—representing not just space, but also caste and neighborhood status, and most importantly the cultural values of the people (Madan, 1989; Glush Kova and Feldhaus, 1998).

Methodology

The present paper is an ethnographic investigation that incorporates a qualitative research methodology whereby the data was collected from 103 Jangi village households. Initially, research consisted of participant observation, along with narrative and in-depth interviewing using open-ended and fixed response questions. Participants from each household were free to elaborate, or be interviewed in new but related directions. Here an attempt was made to unravel the management of the village commons by the people themselves, as well as the Village Gram Panchayat. Apart from that, exclusive interviews of the women

household members were also undertaken as to how they exploited or maintained the village commons for their daily basic needs. Women are regarded as the mainstay of this mountain economy; hence, it was necessary to record their views on the village commons. Focus group interviews were also undertaken with the male villagers regarding the maintenance of the commons and other natural resources. Thus, this paper builds upon the verbatim accounts of the villagers themselves to reveal the general management of the village commons.

The Village Commons of Jangi

Being at a high altitude village, Jangi is characterized by small landholdings and a production system based around a scarcity of resources. For instance the local Khuls (streams) supply limited amounts of water for the village and its economy. A single stream passing through the village is the mainstay for its horticulturalists, and thus requires proper maintenance and equal distribution rights for the all the village's families. Similarly the animals' fodder is taken care of by the collection from the village's Kanda (barren high altitude land). It is particularly women who collect the fodder without touching the village's vegetation. The village's animals are never allowed to enter fields or even roam around. Rather, they are taken to the Kanda land, where they are set free to graze. Hence, this Kanda land forms a part of the village commons.

Jangi's diversity of production practices seems adapted to the risk-prone mountainous environment, and the main risk in any agricultural production is from the weather. Thus, there is always a necessity to maximize production while mediating environmental risk. The foremost example of Jangi's production system's diversity and flexibility is the labor arrangement, combining efficiently mobilized manpower with stringently enforced village regulations that ensure an equitable

distribution of responsibilities. As Paldan Devi (Pradhan of the Panchayat) says,

Most of the village maintenance work is in the hands of the Panchayat. We generally need local cooperation in development of the village. Hence, we have diverted the full authority to the Village Deota Committee, which looks after most of the matters concerning the village communal life. Works like maintenance of irrigational channels (Khuls), renovation of the Deota Temple and monastery for religious gathering every fortnight, which necessitates the participation of at least one member of each family, is under the responsibility of the Village Deota Committee (including Kardars, who are all Rajputs). We have been doing this traditionally and hence we do not want to bring any change in the village authority. Our Deota is supreme here in the village; every action in this village is on his verdict. We can never think of doing anything without his permission. The Village Deota Committee, depending upon the seriousness of the task, imposes a fine of Rs 50 on a particular family which fails to participate in the fortnightly gatherings at the Deota temple when the Deota comes out. A complete register is maintained by the Kardars in which all the names of the family heads are mentioned. Presence and absence is marked, and fines are imposed on families who absent themselves from the fortnightly Deota appearance. If the family is unable to pay the fine, then their share from the forest produce of Neoza [Chigoza pine] is deducted. Similar are the fines when a family absents itself from the annual khul maintenance and repairs. These repairs are done twice every year, and family participation is a must; at least one member has to be present. In case of absence, one has to pay to the Village Deota Committee an amount equal to a hired labor, i.e., around Rs 70. Deductions are to enforce the strict rule of compulsory attendance

both at the temple, and when repairs of Khuls are undertaken. These cultural features have been going on for hundreds of years. Our forefathers did it, and now we are carrying forward this legacy.

One important point inferable from this statement is that although the sanctions regarding the absence of a family at the Deota temple indicate the enforcement of religion and authority on the masses, the sanctions applied when one absents himself from annual maintenance of Khuls show the ecological importance of an uninterrupted water supply, which is as important as religious observance. If the Khuls are not maintained, then the village might be water-deficient and the economy would suffer.

The Neoza produce from the Village Commons is equally distributed among all the families of the village, irrespective of caste. Its overall collection proceeds under the watchful eyes of the Village Panchayat and Village Deota Committee. The Mathas (religious functionary at the Deota temple, Dharam Kirti) is the main representative of the Deota who looks after all the collection and distribution.

Chilgoza pine cones mature in the month of October, so a meeting of the villagers to decide the collection of these cones is held by the deity nominees at a time during that month when the villagers feel ready. The villagers assemble at a specified time, date and place, mostly in the premises of the temple. The Groakch (religious functionary at the temple of the Deota) initiates the proceedings, and the villagers collectively decide the dates of collection. According to Dharam Kirti,

Generally one male and one female from each family are nominated for collection on the specified date. Teams of one male and one female (mostly of the same family) spread out in the forests, and the male member climbs the tree and plucks the cones while the female member gathers the dropped cones. The trees contain three kinds of cones, viz., old opened cones from last year's crop, freshly matured

cones, which contain ripe *Neoza* nuts and the small immature cones which will mature in the following year. Only cones with ripe nuts are harvested. Collection starts in the morning, and lasts until 4 pm, when every party brings the collected cones to one place and the collections are entered in the record maintained by a person at the collection site.

I observed that a team collected about two gunny bags containing about 80 kilograms of *Neoza*. The entire day's collection was heaped at a designated place, and then distributed equally among all the collected partners by locally employed distributors, who are mainly Kardars. There are two persons from the Deota Committee who weigh the full quantity of *Neoza*, and then distribute it equally among all the participating families of the village enrolled in the register. The Mathas says,

One has to bring at least two gunny bags full of *Neoza*, which is equivalent to 80 kilograms. Entries are made in the register; if the quantity is less, then again the next day that family collects the remaining amount of *Neoza*. Moreover, the share of the erring families is deducted [if they are] absent from the fortnightly appearance of the Deota. This communal distribution of *Neoza* is in fact a sustainable distribution of the forest produce, to avoid any conflict. The involvement of the Village Deota Committee in the distribution of produce from "village commons" also demonstrates its authority on the village social life.

Conclusion

The production system in Jangi village is interpreted in the context of its risk-mediating roles. Its system of forest management also ensures

equitable incomes for the local people. This helps to harmonize exploitation of these common property resources with their preservation, and provides a democratic mechanism for conflict resolution. At the same time, the system also perfectly jells with the religious beliefs and practices of the community through the Village Deota (deity). These traditional approaches need to be replicated elsewhere, because this method of empowering local communities to manage their common property resources can promote sustainable livelihoods on a much wider scale, unless they prove to be totally biased towards a particular community.

Close proximity to natural resources and local control of them, intimate functional knowledge about them (again largely because of the closeness of the system), and lower population pressure has helped the people of Jangi to evolve folk technologies and institutional arrangements, and to enforce them without external interference, for the protection, regeneration and regulated use of their resources. In the process, socio-economic attitudes and norms, which have gradually evolved for the use of this community's biophysical resources, help in linking its social system with its ecological one to ensure sustainable use of resources in a subsistence context.

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