

Socio-Ecology and Religious Affiliations in Three Himalayan Villages: Implications for Mental Health

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The paper has explored three north Himalayan villages to understand how community involves the divine factor through the institution of deity for its well-being. The institution of Jamlu in Malana of Kullu district has perhaps a unique democratic system for resolving people's problems but at the same time the community isolates itself through social fencing. Second instance is from the far eastern part of Himachal Pradesh, the Mathi of Chhitkul in Kinnaur district. People in this physically remote village show unique achievement in the indicators modern development though abiding with Hindu and Buddhist religious beliefs. Third example is from a comparatively easily accessible place where the modern horticulture has a significant impact. The apple growers of Banchunch in Shimla district, where the institution of Boindra thrive, revive an old cult of Bhunda *yajna* for their well-being in a unique show of solidarity between villages over an enormous area.

A search for an indigenous approach to psychology has gained impetus in recent years in India. But it is not exemplified in the methods of study as well as in the explanations of behavior. An example is the rationale of a study that states, "*In the Indian cultural setting, cosmic beliefs are presumed to be important determinants of all happenings in life, including sickness and suffering*" (see Dalal & Singh, 1992/2002; p.105). Several studies were conducted following this rationale (Dalal, 2001). These studies appear to suggest that, (a) religious beliefs are specific to India, and (b) Indians do not look beyond cosmic beliefs for the betterment of their health. But people all over the world believe in different religions and also in the God (see Wilson, 1978 for an authoritative account of the religious nature of human species). The second assumption is not very different from the view of a few Western scientists that the Indians are fatalists and have low achievement motivation. As far

as achievement motivation is concerned, other Indian psychologists (Sinha, 2002) have looked into it. Its association with fate is a highly contentious issue. In their analysis, Dalal and his coworkers reduced the cosmic beliefs to cosmic factors such as God's will, fate and *karma*. The results of these studies indicated that patients attributed their illness to metaphysical beliefs (fate, God's will, *karma*), but it had no link with psychological recovery. The causal model suggested was that cosmic belief led to low sense of personal control, which in turn resulted in poor psychological adjustment.

Following this causal model, psychologists must explain the phenomena as to why people through the premises of spiritual leaders and religious institutions all over the world. From an evolutionary and cultural point of view such behaviour cannot prosper in a population over a long period. It must have survival value. Besides that there are studies, which indicate

the positive psychological effect of belief in God. For example, Broota (1997) explored beliefs not rooted in experienced realities and that might also go beyond the range of direct perceptions. He illustrated the functional importance of beliefs for the individual. Before the major surgery, patients had heightened level of anxiety and belief in God, which were reduced after the surgery. It was suggested that heightened belief in God was a form of coping with the heightened anxiety and stress experienced by the patient preoperatively. A recent study by psychiatrists (Raguram, Venkateswaran, Ramakrishna & Weiss, 2002) has provided some evidence to support the contention that the temple premises may have some healing properties.

It is noticeable that psychologists in India have ignored the functional (evolutionary) explanations of behavior. In a paper, Misra, Jain and Singh (1995) have developed a strong case for cultural origins of cognition. However there is an apprehension in their mind that in the area of cognition, cultural causation had been often ignored in preference for biological explanations. This fear is even more prominent in words of Varma (2002), where it is felt that physiological explanations would make 'psychology redundant.' However, a well-informed biologist has no such intention (see Markl, 2003), if his vision is enriched by ultimate explanations of behavior, as we find in the area of evolutionary psychology. More than a decade ago, Crook (1988), an ardent believer in evolutionary aspects of behavior, noted that the vocabulary of experience was less fashionable in scientific circles and there was tendency among scientists to reify and develop complex mechanistic models. His is a top down approach to the evolution of consciousness (cognitive processes) that considers mind as a model of reality where socio-ecological and socio-psychological conditions have important contribution. In so far as our concern is the experiencing individual, his mental representations (the

'mind') of the external world are in fact 'the reality' for the individual.

There is often overconfidence among social scientists in understanding their own cultural groups. An example is a study of the people of Jaunsar area, which is about hundred kilometers from Shimla, a relatively modern township of India. An anthropologist, Joshi (2000), has narrated the traditional healing practices of Jaunsari people, as if they belonged to a very different 'tribe' and had very distinct system that was not prevalent in any other part of India. The investigator empathizes with the 'tribe' for its miseries that were ascribed to 'polyandry', supernatural belief or luck factor. But one has to read the description of these people (the 'tribe') by Zoller (1990); it inspires an urge to learn from the other culture. Notably, the people of Jaunsar laid the foundation of the Chipko, a major environmental movement of India (Pirta, 2003). For polyandry, the analysis of Crook and Crook (1988) should be illuminating for its role in the social life of the Himalayan people. There is another significant conceptualization, the Nature-Man-Spirit complex by Vidyarthi (1963), which not only considers the ecological cognition of people living close to nature but also has the potential of a new paradigm of study. Yet another approach is in Cranney's (2001) study on the mountain women from an area adjacent to Jaunsar, the Shimla hills, where the investigator narrates the lived experiences as objectively as possible. Thus the arrogance of the investigator or empathy to his subjects must not undermine the complexity of the native mind.

In a series of studies our attempt is to explore the institution of deity in Himachal Pradesh as an example of gene-culture co-evolution with its functional implications in the area of community mental health (Pirta, 2005; 2006). The present study explores the socio-ecological characteristics of three Himalayan villages with relation to the religious affiliations

of people that may have consequences for their mental health.

Method

The data collection involved three methods: (a) field observation, (b) interview, and (c) psychological testing. Natural habitats have significance in ecology, and they are also considered important in Gestalt psychology tradition of "behavior settings". In these viewpoints the analysis of behavior involves the environmental and socio-cultural constraints as important factors in shaping particular kind of behavior. However, in the present study, we have in addition the conception of the entrenchment of the divine or spiritual factor in a particular space through human cognition. Long ago, this has been visualized in the concept of "noosphere" by Teilhard de Chardin (Feys, 1973); for example, enveloping a hillock in the name of a goddess and then modifying behavior with certain

regulations or ways of worship, with regard to it. Thus we have also included the three institutions of deities from the respective habitats.

Following these theoretical concepts the investigators collected relevant data from the three areas, Malana in Kullu district, Chhitkul in Kinnaur district and Banchunch in Shimla district of Himachal Pradesh. The main socio-ecological characteristics of these three areas are given in Table 1. Once the senior investigator (R. S. S.) reached in a particular village, he would make rapport with the local people with the help of an acquaintance. His attempt was to acquire the necessary information through observation, interviews and videography. The video films were later analyzed to extract relevant information. At least one week was spent in an area. In addition, the relevant archival material was used to interpret the results.

Table 1 Socio-ecological characteristics of Malana, Chhitkul and Banchunch

Sl. No.	Characteristics	Malana	Study Areas Chhitkul	Banchunch
1	Himalayan Zone (Degree Celsius)	Temperate (-5 to +25)	Temperate (-10 to +15)	Temperate (-7 to +25)
2	Altitude	>2000m	>3000m	>1500m
3	District/Tehsil	Kullu/ Kullu	Kinnaur/Sangla	Shimla/Rohru
4	Rural/Urban (Literacy)	Rural (14.3 %)	Rural (81.9%)	Rural (69.8%)
5	Households (Household Size)	214 (5.0)	111 (6.0)	100 (6.0)
6	Population (Male/Female)	1101 (544/557)	563 (270/293)	607 (317/290)
7	Livelihood	Cultivators	Cultivators	Cultivators
8	Transhumance	Prevalent (Indirect)	Prevalent	Vanishing
9	Special Status	None	Scheduled Tribe	None
10	Trade relations	Tourism	Apples	Apples
11	Religion	Hinduism	Hinduism & Buddhism	Hinduism
12	Social isolation	Extreme (cultural)	Extreme (natural)	None

In each area, 20 adult males and females were selected through purposive sampling, and eight statements were orally spoken to each subject, one by one, to know his/her religious affiliations. Each statement has a main stem that elicited information on one specific aspect of religious affiliation (see Table 2). For each statement there was a four-point scale to quantify the subject's involvement in that religious aspect. The score varied from zero to three, the higher the score, the greater the religious affiliation. Statistical analyses involved applying one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the scores obtained for each of the eight statements for the three groups having 60 participants in all.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study are briefly presented in Table 1 and Table 2. They are analyzed here keeping in view the objective of the study. Our purpose was to understand the implications of the socio-ecological characteristics of the three villages situated in three habitats along with the religious affiliations of people as revealed through self-reports, for social psychiatry or community mental health. Another term used for it in recent years is the rural psychiatry (Srinivasa Murthy, 1998; 2004). We will deal here with some broad aspects of the community mental health. Although it involves the state structure supporting community services at national level, the local level structures can also contribute through various ways, such as finances, manpower and basic necessities. At both levels, it is the power structure that is an integral part of the social psychiatric analysis. In psychology the absence of power structure in the analysis of behavior is rather conspicuous. Though the power is confined to a few in a society, it has tremendous influences in controlling the behavior of a submissive majority that do not have power. There are two aspects of this power structure

that has significance here. It is controlled through two parallel institutions: the socio-political and the religious. For the villages included in the present study, though the political entity at present was one, the government of India, the religious institutions were predominantly specific to each village. The latter included, the Jamlu Devata in Malana, the Mathi Devi in Chhitkul and Devata Boindra in Banchunch. An elected body of members governed the institution of deity, the latter played important role in the physical, social and mental aspects of the community. A distinguishing feature of the institution of deity was its participation in mundane life of peasantry through direct as well as indirect processes. The indirect processes involved the developmentally acquired representations of the institution, which governed the behaviors of the individual. On the other hand, the direct processes involved obeying the *kara* (rules and regulations) implemented by the managing body of the institution of deity and the spokesperson of the deity. The latter would go into trance or possession and speak on behalf of the deity. These states have yet not drawn the attention of psychologists, but psychiatrists (Chakraborty, 2001) and anthropologists (Ram, 2001) consider possession an important manifestation.

Before the independence of India the political entity was different for each of these villages, and at that time the institution of deity and the institution of Raja has operated side by side, often interacting with each other in complex ways (Thapar, 2002). One such example is given here that has relationship with the territorial conflict and to the acquisition of a position in the political power structure.

In fact territorial conflicts represent among the few social conflicts that have close relationship with survival of social groups and may involve co-evolution of biological and cultural traits. In such cases, the significant thing is the involvement of some higher cognitive processes (the representations of

divine factor) with regard to movement and occupancy over a territory. One such case is the institution of Mathi Devi in Chhitkul that has some relation with the two erstwhile adjacent states, the Bashahr (now in Himachal Pradesh) and the Garhwal (now in Uttaranchal). The evidence comes from the *chironing* (history of deity) narrated by the *grokch* (the spokes person) of the Badri Nath of Kamru in the Baspa valley (Mamgain, 1971; page 362). Note that the old capital of Bashahr state was at Kamaru. The Mathi Devi of Chhitkul is the wife of the Badri Nath of Kamru, and both have relationship with the Garhwal state. These relations of deities are in myths and beliefs. They perhaps indicate territorial relations of the Bashahr and Garhwal states before the independence of India. More recent documentary evidence comes from the tussle for occupying the throne of Bashahr state in the beginning of the last century. The Raja of Tehri Garhwal tried to install his brother on the throne of Bushahr. But the attempts were unsuccessful due to the resentment of local elite families, who succeeded in installing Padam Singh on the throne of Bushahr.

The contribution of Gopi Chand of Rohru (where the third village Banchunch is located) is significant in this case. He was the *mukhtyar* or attorney on behalf of the minor Padam Singh and took up the case with British authorities. After about four years the case was decided in favor of Padam Singh keeping in view the sentiments of local populations (Mamgain, 1971; page 65). It is significant to note that the local deities from these areas go to pay obeisance to Lord Bdrinath in Garhwal Himalaya. One such visit took place in early 2006 when Davata Boindra from Banchunch (one of the study villages) visited the shrines of greater deities in Garhwal Himalya. Before this pilgrimage, the institution of Boindra Devata has organized a Bhunda *yajna* for the well-being and prosperity of its subjects, a

unique show of solidarity between villages over a large area.

To summarize, until the case was decided there was turmoil in the Bushahr state and the well-being of its people was in stake. Moreover, there are indications of the involvement of the local institutions of deities in this conflict for power through the *dhoom*, a socially accepted way of registering protest to the authority in power. Our assumption is that the devata's institution in Himachal Pradesh has much to do with the material aspects of human life in these hills. But the mechanism is through cognitive (psychological) processes and is manifested in mental representations and behaviors. The net effect is gross material change. These are ways of creating change through socio-psychological means at individual level, and where the community is involved as a whole, affecting the well-being of people. Earlier, Gadgil (2001) has emphasized the socio-ecological aspects of the institution of deity that has immense potential for study with relation to conflicts of interests amongst different human groups.

The above case involved the mythological, historical and folk psychology. In the following two examples we shall try to integrate the findings of the socio-ecological observations and religious perceptions that has important implications for mental health. We shall follow the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2001) Consultation that health is "not merely the absence of disease or infirmity", but rather, "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being". Advances in biological and behavioral sciences, the WHO report noted, have sharpened this definition with regard to the mutuality of mind-body significant for the following cases. The second case taken here involves the present scenario in the study villages and its relationship for the well-being of people.

Table 2 The Differences on Various Aspects of Religious Affiliation among the villagers of Three Socioecological Habitats (One way ANOVA)

Aspects of religious affiliation	Means			F-ratios (df 2/57)(n = 60)
	Malana (n = 20)	Chhitkul (n = 20)	Banchunch (n = 20)	
A. Extent of spirituality	2.75 ± .44	1.8 ± .41	2.95 ± .22	54.47**
B. Visits to temple of deity	3.00 ± 0	2.05 ± .75	1.45 ± .76	31.79**
C. Visits to religious places	1.75 ± .44	2.05 ± .76	3.0 ± 0	33.02**
D. Extent of religiousness	2.75 ± .44	1.85 ± .58	2.85 ± .36	26.91**
E. Relationship with other beings	2.4 ± .5	2.0 ± 0	2.85 ± .36	28.04**
F. Meaningfulness of spirituality	2.4 ± .5	2.0 ± 0	2.25 ± .44	5.44*
G. Importance of religion	2.45 ± .51	2.25 ± .44	2.1 ± .3	3.34
H. Joining religious activities	2.9 ± .3	2.8 ± .41	2.91 ± .3	.55

* p < .01; ** p < .001

Whereas Chhitkul has remained a physically isolated terrain, Malana people have isolated themselves through social fencing, following some religious and cultural practices. The Banchunch is comparatively open to outside world. Social fencing of Malana community is so complete that in association with the institution of Jamlu Devata it does not even expose its members to education; for communication they use *Kanashi*, a local dialect. The literacy rate according to 2001 census is 14.3%. Chhitkul people, taking advantage of the scheduled tribe status and faith in Buddhist teachings, besides the other Hindu religious affiliations, have achieved a remarkable literacy rate of 81.9%. It is followed by physically and socially more accessible Banchunch community with a literacy rate of 69.8%. Now consider some aspects of religious affiliations revealed through the self-perception measure. People from all the three communities, pay equal and high importance to spirituality and religion (see results of ANOVA on aspects F, G & H in Table 2) in their lives, however, the socio-cultural sanctions are different. Jamlu Devata of Malana does not

allow its subjects access to other religious places (see aspects B & C).

This last aspect of religious affiliations and other sanctions of social fencing in Malana, contradicts some stark realities of the World's oldest democracy. The third case is associated with the social psychiatric implications of abusing a local resource, traditionally used for entirely different puposes (e.g., fibres of Cannabis plant were used for making ropes, shoes and stitching), for earning quick money illegally even flouting the religious and cultural practices. For example, the villagers of Malana are getting deeply entrenched in the illicit trade of *charas* (*bhang* or *ganja*) extracted from leaves of Cannabis plant. Our field observations revealed that young as well old generations, mostly males were addicted to marijuana and they were earning money by selling the product to outsiders. An exploration of internet would reveal the global reach of this Malana product. Besides that, tourists from abroad are allowed to stay in guest houses on the periphery of village. These guest houses are hired out to people from nearby areas, and the villagers of Malana charge rent from these

middlemen. Now the important question is, does the village deity sanction such transactions into an illicit trade? Drug addiction was ruining the health of the younger generation, in addition it was exposing them to extremely hazardous relationships. Although one would expect the openness of Chhitkul community, its comparatively lower religiousness (see mean scores on aspects A & D) and high literacy as facilitators to drug addiction, it has not happened in this physically remote village of Sangla valley, though the Cannabis plant grows there. The people of this village follow the Hindu goddess Mathi Devi and they also strongly believe in Buddhism. This village is on the Kinner Kailash pilgrimage path of the people of Kinnaur district in Himachal Pradesh. Such drug addiction is almost negligible in more open (see aspect E) Banchunch village near Shimla. Perhaps the social fencing in the Malana village, the flux of tourists in Kullu and Manali, and the high monetary incentive have combined together and put Malana on a path where the physical, social and mental well-being of an ancient democratic community was in danger.

The above three issues have significance for understanding the mental health of people. They include the power structure of deity, the high religious affiliations and high literacy, and using social fencing for the acquisition of wrong practices of resource use. Religious institutions of deities are the traditional community mental health centers in the hills (Pirta, 2005; 2006). They provide the basis to explore mental health of people and have been noticed by other investigators as well (Chakraborty, 2001; Ram, 2001). A major change observed in recent times is in the area of power relations. The government is taking over the administrative control of these institutions of deities, presumably for the well-being of people. We suggest that such changes should harmonize with the traditional role of these institutions and this is possible by developing the institutions of deities as community mental health centers.

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