Special Issue Commentary

Situating the Gaddi Community of Himachal Pradesh, India in a Wider World: A Commentary

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Abstract

How does the process of claiming historically and socially situated identities play out? How are anxieties of reconfigured gender relations expressed in the present? The anthropologists of this Special Issue (SI) interrogate these questions by focusing on what it means to be a Gaddi person in the mountainous state of Himachal Pradesh. This commentary focuses on three articles that are based on multiple, long-term fieldwork focused on the travails of being marginalized and possibilities of subaltern agency. Whether it is status competition among Sippis (Christopher), a community with both Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe designations in different states, or women being stigmatized as 'witches' (Simpson), especially among caste groups considered inferior within the Gaddi hierarchy, these are far from isolated phenomenon. These struggles reflect crucial aspects of 'Gaddiness' in the present where the term Gaddi is an ethnonym to refer to various unequally stratified caste groups that is popularly abstracted to mean high-caste pastoralists (Christopher and Phillimore). The three articles also reflect on the socioeconomic transformations across South Asia in general but particularly experienced in rural India. Himachal Pradesh may have been more geographically remote only a few decades ago, but deeper penetration of the state and market along with new infrastructure are forcing a reconsideration of colonial stereotypes about 'tribality'. As a scholar who primarily works on western India, my commentary flags some key issues dealing with social theory, identity, state-formation and gender roles by comparing trends cross India with the specific Gaddi case study.

Keywords

Recommended Citation

Normalizing Gaddis as Another South Asian Community

The long shadow of British colonial ethnography is reflected in the application of a caste-tribe rubric or a related one of 'tribes in transition' by academics studying India (Raskhow 2022). This Special Issue (SI) critiques these analytical frameworks as static and ahistorical, instead deploying a processual approach used by anthropologist Edmund Leach (1954) to study highland Burma (now Myanmar). Leach's diachronic approach of seeing societies as processes in time and ethnic identities as fluid was profitably used by historian Sumit Guha (1999) for his *longue durée* study of Bhils, a group dwelling among the Satpuras hills and its adjoining plains of western India. Christopher's work also draws on Jaques Lacan's (1949) psychoanalytical notion of misrecognition to analyze conflicting identity claims by marginal groups among Gaddis that are searching for cultural dignity and federal positive discrimination. Simpson highlights the strength of studying gender through long-term fieldwork to tease out women's agency amidst intergenerational conflict, even in situations dealing with witchcraft that earlier works on Bhils (Skaria 1999) have linked primarily to patriarchal control and masculinity. This SI dispenses with several stereotypical notions due to its processual approach and reliance on empirical fieldwork data.

The Gaddi community is seen both in popular imagination and academia as an agro-pastoralist 'hill tribe' that makes claims of being Rajputs (warrior caste). And, of-course, 'tribe' stands for a homogenous society of 'nature's children'. This stereotype has parallels across the Indian subcontinent with regards to other ethnic groups inhabiting hilly terrains, such as the Bhils. However, the social reality is that the Bhils are comprised of several distinct groups that have hierarchy within them with strict rules for *roti-beti vyavhar* (dining and marital regulations). The Bhils are also comprised of caste communities deemed 'untouchable', such as Goval (Thakur 2021). Pawra and Tadvis are two Bhil groups

that consider themselves superior to other Bhils and may selectively dine with others or accept brides from exogenous groups that they deem inferior while not offering their own women (ibid.). This SI focuses on Sippi and Hali, two Gaddi groups on opposite ends of the Schedule Caste (SC) continuum, SC being a government term for affirmative action policies, popularly called reservations in India, concerning formerly 'untouchable' castes. To one side are Halis, former Chamars (leather workers), who struggle with the continued legacy of being 'untouchable' and, in response, have embraced a *Dalit* politics—Dalit meaning broken is a self-ascribed political term—for inclusion. On the other side, Sippis utilize auto-ethnography, mobilize ritual and practice pilgrimage to position themselves as co-equals or even above Rajput Gaddis, even though they too fall within the SC quota in Kangra District. While Sippis are closely integrated into some Gaddi religious ceremonies, especially their ritual role during the Manimahesh pilgrimage, Halis face more entrenched exclusionary practices (though these relations are not frozen in time as Simpson reminds us). Clearly, group identities are not straightforward.

Cliches associated with foraging and itinerant subsistence strategies are also interrogated by the authors of this SI, who remind us that farming was and remains an integral part of Gaddi sustenance. Scholars in environmental anthropology have analyzed the elaborate community-managed irrigation systems called *kuhls*, patronized by both precolonial rulers and the contemporary postcolonial state (Baker 2007). The presence of small and large kingdoms, including forest polities among the Bhils (Skaria 1999; Thakur 2014) or Chamba royalty in this SI, ties back to some universal aspects of sociopolitical setup. These include surplus extraction, creation and maintenance of social hierarchies, and the reliance on ritual ceremonies for generating consent among subjects (Dirks 2001). The caste system is yet another aspect that is tied to these processes. It is pervasive not just across South Asia but other parts of the world (Jodkha and Shah 2010).

Just like Gaddis, many hill communities such as the Bhils and Gonds of central India inhabit uneven terrain, live in scattered hamlets, and subsist on a mix of farming, animal husbandry and forest produce. Seasonal migration for work has likewise arisen in the last three decades—Gaddi seasonal migrations include the up-down of vertical transhumance and even migrations that follow international tourists to Manali and Goa during the harsh winters in Himachal (Christopher 2020). However, Gaddis can be differentiated by the extreme weather differences between summer and winter in the Himalayas which results in transhumance, a vocational lifestyle shared in neighboring areas of Swat Valley, Pakistan. In contrast to the primacy of ecological determinism in the shaping of relations among various ethnic groups of the Swat Valley (Barth 1956), religious factors and the changing nature of the state also play a large role that is covered below.

The Anthropology of State Formation and Cycles of Identity Claims

This SI persuasively argues that social identities are nebulous and contingent upon various cultural and material factors while also being shaped by historical processes such as state formation, both from above and below (Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005; Corbridge, Williams et al. 2005). We see how disparate groups of Gaddis are making varied claims about their caste, ritual or social status as Dalits, or within the state categories of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (ST); ST is another affirmative action category of the state. These processes are tied to wider sociopolitical claims across the Indian subcontinent that largely reflect on claims made by ST-aspiring communities to the state for benefits through reservation quotas. The claims also reflect on intra-community relations, in this case the wider Gaddi community, that needs to be constantly renegotiated when the balance is deemed unfavorable for various reasons.

Scholarship on the Indian subcontinent has shown how the fluidity of group identity in the pre-colonial period gave way to reification of groups into airtight and essentialist labels such as farmers, martial races and other categories, often to suit the varied purposes of the colonial administration. The ethnographic and enumerative (census) sensibilities of the colonizers (Cohn 1997) were an attempt at providing legibility (Scott 1998) to the vast landmass and its diverse ethnic groups. The governmentality (Foucault 2006) of the colonial state to both shape and control people's conduct, or its expansion by the postcolonial counterpart since 1947, has been a mixed bag. In contrast to the popular image of the modern state's pathological dislike of mobile populations and its keen desire to emplace them (Markovits et al. 2006; Bhattacharya 2018), both Christopher and Simpson argue that the colonial authorities were more tolerant of Gaddi nomadism. The postcolonial state's welfare measures have also resulted in material improvements for marginalized groups of Gaddis and the Bhils of western India (Axelby and Thakur, forthcoming).

The negative aspects of the modern state included the incorporation of Social Darwinist paradigms, wherein groups were categorized along an evolutionary ladder that positioned whiteness on top and 'tribes' on the bottom. The upper castes of Brahmans and Kayasthas, with a monopoly over formal education and serving as the record keepers since the precolonial kingdoms, persisted as the clerks of the colonial empire and had a key role in the production of this racialized colonial ethnography (Guha 1999). While the postcolonial state desisted from defining the term 'tribe' and changed it to ST as part of its welfare measures, colonial contradictions persist into the present. The postcolonial state has 'produced' new 'tribal' groups by adding ethnic groups to that list (Shah 2003). This SI points to the oxymoronic operation of adding Gaddi Brahmans and Gaddi Rajputs as ST in Kangra in 2002 while continuing to exclude the historically disadvantaged Sippi and Hali communities, many of whom strongly self-identify as Gaddi and are largely integrated into Gaddi social life (despite emic exclusions). The Hali claims

of being a 'Scheduled Tribe Dalit' is thus a creative and supplemental strategy.

The Hali demand is, however, only another chapter in their ongoing claims on the state. In Chamba, many of their ancestors joined the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist movement that arose in neighboring Punjab during the colonial period (Christopher 2022). The colonial census that began in 1871 resulted in varied social movements, including the consolidation of peasant groups such as Patels and Marathas in western India, while lower castes made claims to higher status.[1] William Rowe's (1992) study of Noniya, a Dalit caste from north India describes how a few of its upwardly mobile members made claims of being Rajputs and involved the Arya Samaj while distancing themselves from lower castes. Once the postcolonial state brought them under the SC umbrella, their next generation joined the Dalit platform of the Republican Party of India to reaffirm their inferior status (ibid.). Christopher in this SI and elsewhere explores close parallels, that the identity claims made by the SC Gaddi elites encompass Dalit politics, tribal demands, Arya and Radhasoami anti-caste reform movements, and Brahminical priestly purity (as seen with Sippis).

The state's use of governmentality to shape the conduct of its citizens is only one aspect of social existence; there is more to life than material benefits seen through the lens of instrumentalism. Christopher foregrounds this point through the myth of Trilochan Mahadev, Lord Shiva's first oracle recounted by Sippis as a linear progression from mytho-religious past to contemporary social aspiration. It reflects the present moment when both Gaddi pastoralism and Sippi tailoring are in decline and more of a heritage marker than profession. Whether it is the deployment of the legend of Trilochan by Sippis to gain prestige among Hindu-preserving mobile Gaddi pastoralists or contrasting Hali auto-ethnographies of a 'forest-dwelling animists' past, the aim is to embed their communal selves in the wider Gaddi community, its social tropes and religious cosmologies. The struggles of Halis

and Sippis is tied to the concerns of humiliation (Guru 2009) and the quest for dignity (Gold 2002) in the face of rapid sociopolitical changes in the last century which is shared by other marginalized groups across South Asia. The disquiet introduced by the rapid disintegration of the past and its displacement by the new economy in the last few decades has produced yet other challenges.

Markets, Generational Shifts and the Search for Witches

Several contradictory impulses within the Gaddi community are covered in Simpson's paper on the perception among all Gaddi groups that the occurrence of witchcraft has recently increased. She draws on Nancy Munn's conception of witchcraft being linked to the compression (or expansion) of time where both space and time are socially produced. Persistent rumors of witchcraft and black magic in hushed tones go together with its overt denial, given that it reflects 'superstition' in our 'modern' age. This raises three issues. First, conscious distancing from the idea that Gaddis being 'tribal' means professing in 'primitive' beliefs such as sorcery. This ties into the critique by Johannes Fabian (2002) that 'tribal' groups, a primary focus within the history of anthropology, unfortunately and popularly constitute the 'other' of modernity and therefore are seen as anachronistic. Simpson shows that the Gaddis, however, positively reframe their tribal identity that is not rooted in outdated beliefs. This approach reflects a sophisticated awareness of global trend by Gaddis linked to indigenous discourses. These discourses arose as a transnational process during the 1980s in North America, where Native American tribes came to be seen as possessing a superior moral force and proto-environmentalism, qualities lacking in the western world (Jackson and Warren 2005). Similar to indigenous discourses that successfully reversed the 'primitive' aspect of tribal identity, the Gaddis retain their belief systems and identity but are careful to ensure that it does not distance them from the wider world.

The coevality of Gaddis with 'mainstream' society, especially in the Punjabi cultural milieu of Kangra, also subjects them to similar responses in the face of shared challenges across time. This brings us to the second point about the impacts of colonialism that disrupted and disadvantaged many groups and their lifeways. Colonial revenue and forestry policies isolated many ST groups while benefiting plains-dwelling farming castes. In western India, groups such as the Bhils bore the brunt of new administrative processes and were exploited by both colonial administrators and dominant peasant groups. The Bhils saw a series of religious-based movements during the 1920s-1930s marked by messianism (Thakur 2014) and goddess possession, leading to commoners mouthing her commands (Hardiman 1987) for undertaking social reforms within the community. Here we encounter a paradoxical situation where 'modern' values about hygiene and patriarchy were being introduced through a 'primitive' process of possession. Messianic movements and spirit possession were however not confined to only ST groups but took place among many caste and religious groups (Fuchs 1965) that are often overlooked. If we keep aside the textbook version of homogenized mainstream religions such as Hinduism and Islam, possessing supernatural powers by seemingly ordinary people including women is integral to Indian society (Flueckiger 2006). The association of women with special powers or getting possessed by female deities and fertility goddesses is a pan-Indian tradition (Sontheimer 1989). That still leaves us with the malevolent aspect of possessions that Simpson highlights.

The third and final point deals with patriarchy, gender dynamics and intergenerational conflict. Women and their bodies often become the site where patriarchy and ideas of masculinity unfold. Increased incidences of witch accusations took place because of the suppression of various small Bhil polities, their loss of authority and its consequent impact on Bhil masculinity during the colonial period (Skaria 1999). The Gaddi community (including both high and low-caste groups) has largely sedentarized and is no longer closely interdependent in a shared struggle to survive the harsh Himalayan climate. Instead, they have availed themselves of new economic opportunities due to seasonal migration, state development projects and the deeper penetration of market economy. This has resulted in heightened consumerism, growth of the tourism industry and conspicuous consumption entering far-flung villages via new infrastructure access. A binary class stratification of a few rich and the rest being seen as poor, persisting until the 1980s, has given way to a new middle class due to the currents of late capitalism. Surely, this rests on an unstable foundation amidst surges of inequality, where class is both a subjective perception and an objective reality (Dickey 2016).

The rise of a new *rural* middle class resulting in new social tensions is a facet of societies in the Global South, including countries such as Bolivia (Latin America) for groups that can unproblematically be called indigenous (Calderon 2016). In Simpson's analysis, we meet Pravesh's Hali family, flush with newly accumulated wealth, reflecting their insecurities by linking adverse events to the evil eye and neighborhood *jadu* (witchcraft). Mobility and change in status also come with the withdrawal of women from the labor force (Gidwani 2008). An agentive aspect comes to the fore as we find that it is young women themselves who aspire to withdraw from the labor force as a marker of status, or who draw on tropes of witchcraft to stigmatize older generations of women in an effort to carve out a new notion of femininity. Ideas and tastes, however, move in circular motion. And while getting facial tattoos is completely passé for more recent generations of Gaddi women, it may also be trendy for metropolitan youth unrelated to Gaddis. Just like millets cultivated by various ST groups is being embraced in packaged forms by the same middle class urban dwellers who scoffed at it as inferior until a couple of decades ago, it's conceivable that older ideas may again find favor with Gaddis as well.[2]

Conclusion:

This SI focuses on the Gaddi community as comprising several groups. In doing so, it draws on a processual approach within anthropology and history instead of exploring an ultimately futile search for an 'authentic' tribal self or group identity. That quest only leads to reifications and static notions of identity rooted in stereotypes of 'traditional' subsistence models and ecological determinism and offers limited analytical leverage. By contrast, these articles help us appreciate various identity claims as 'tribal', castes, forest dwellers, migrants, or women of different generational cohorts, among others, as processual negotiations over time, informed by the interplay of cultural and material factors. Varied identity claims are partially a result of state formation processes running through the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial periods. On one level, state processes such as enumeration, categorization, creation of records, reorganization of space (princely states, direct rule etc.) and identities ('tribals', farmers, herders etc.) as well as its welfare functions, such as the reservation policy, shape identity assertions over time. Irrespective of whether the state reinforces its legitimacy by invoking religious or secular authority, religion remains a key element in identity formation and for governing social relations. Religious cosmologies inform the inherently unequal caste system and its functional manifestations, shaped by mythological and ritual practices (epitomized by Sippis in this SI). Patterns of endogamy and dining both reinforce inter- and intra-group identities and are also utilized for challenging the status quo. Paying close attention to gender relations, continuously reconfigured due to the socio-economic processes outlined above, helps anthropologists to appreciate the social anxieties that animate a group and their neighboring ones.

And what of the unrealized goal of the SI editors to bring in Gaddi researchers to reflect on their own society? In many ways, the classical approach of an 'outsider' studying a society using participant observation (Malinowski 1922), learning the language, customs and lifestyle of the group over long periods of time, has merit. M.N. Srinivas's (1976: 333) anecdote where the villagers tell him as the anthropologist that 'you know much more about our village than us,' highlights the possibilities of this approach. In the future, let us hope Gaddis will produce scholarship on their own culture, including metatextual studies of how outsiders have studied them over the years. With increasing literacy and education attested to in the articles in this SI, we can expect such studies to come out soon.

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Endnotes

1. See Breman (1985) for the amalgamation of various farming castes in a new Patel identity and for the absorption of Dubla as a lower caste.

2. See Christopher (2020b: 44-5) for the re-emergence in the new social media popularity of #radkaat (wander) to reclaim wandering pastoralism as a trope, not a practiced lifestyle.

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