

Situating Conserving Communities in their Place: Political Economy of Kullu Devban

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Abstract: *The contemporary dynamics of two neighbouring Kullu devban (sacred groves) are analysed in this article. One of these devban is a model of community conservation based on indigenous belief system and management practices. The other suffered the opposite fate and was harvested in the last decade. While this latter devban is a challenge to simple models that view sacred groves as archetypical institutions of community conservation, the presence of the former shows that straightforward critiques of community-based conservation present only a partial picture. An ethnographic study of two devban reveals that while the immediate decisions regarding a devban are taken locally, the key influences determining their changing and diverse fate emanate from spheres of property regimes, state policy and an environmental discourse that originate beyond the local community. The pre-colonial communal property of Kullu devta's was transformed into private property in colonial records. The environmentalist turn in state, donor agency and NGO policies and discourse, and recent institutions of self governance and resource management that attempt to recreate community play an important role in devban dynamics. While the micro-political analysis of devban reveals fault-lines in the world of social actors whose actions directly impinge on devban, an understanding of current trends influencing them requires a macro-political economic perspective. The political economy of Kullu devban is complex, dynamic and under-determined, and due to all these characters it permits diverse outcomes on the ground.*

Keywords: sacred groves, devban, Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, community, conservation

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INTRODUCTION: INTERROGATING CONSERVING COMMUNITIES

*Devban*¹ are forest patches in the Himalayan region of northern India that are considered sacred by a local community. Their sacred status acts to proscribe many resource-use practices, which the community considering them sacred may be undertaking in neighbouring areas. Consequently, *devban* often have a distinct vegetative cover that is dense, multi-storeyed and diverse, compared to surrounding forests. Sacred groves are a unique social institution combining distinctive cultural, religious, conservation, resource use and management ideas and practices.

The *devban* of Kullu valley in Himachal Pradesh are an integral part of the *devta* system, a unique socio-cultural religious institution of this region. Each cluster of villages in Kullu has its own deity called the *devta*. It is estimated that there are over 300 *devta* in the Kullu valley. Naturistic and animistic forms such as *Nag* (snakes), *Vanshiras* (forest guardians), and *Jognies* (fairies) as well as various gods of the Hindu pantheon are worshipped as *devta*. The distinctiveness of the Kullu *devta* is that they are treated by villagers as corporal entities who own property and maintain kinship relations with *devta* of other villages. Specific forests adjacent to villages are said to belong to the respective *devta* and these forests are called *devban*. While the *devta* system of Kullu has unique features, the practice of considering particular forests as sacred has much wider prevalence. Sacred forests or sacred groves have been identified in many regions of India variously called *jogmaya* in Rajasthan, *sarna* or *jaher* in Jharkhand and Orissa, *deorali* in Darjeeling hills; *lakyntang* in Khasi and Jantia villages in Meghalaya (Roy Burman 1992, 1997).

The significance of local-level, indigenous, community institutions such as *devban* in sustainable management of natural resources is increasingly being acknowledged and emphasised. The sustainable future of forest and natural resource management at the national and global level is recognised today as being dependent on identifying, promoting and developing sustainable community-level institutions (Fernandes and Kulkarni 1983; Poffenberger and McGeen 1996). In this context it is critical to understand the dynamics of transformation of community institutions along with broader processes of social change.

Scholarly work on sacred groves in India has presented two opposing images of these social institutions. One group of studies present sacred groves as the archetype of community-based traditional conservation systems. These studies have highlighted the conservation ethic of communities that protect sacred groves and have presented case studies where this conservation ethic has resulted in conservation (Gadgil 1975; Gadgil and Vartak 1976, 1981a, 1981b; Romm 1989; Gadgil and Chandran 1992; Ramakrishnan 1998; Malhotra et al. 2000; Tripathi 2001). On the other hand, more recent empirical studies have critiqued the conservation ethic attributed to these social institutions. Case studies have been presented to argue that sacred groves may not necessarily be a better conservation model, that communities maintaining sa-

cred groves may not necessarily have a conservation ethic or objective, that conservation may merely be a by-product of other factors for which sacred groves are maintained, and that sacred groves are inequitable and unsustainable institutions (Roy Burman 1992, 1997; Freeman 1999; Kalam 1999).

In this paper we engage with this debate on the nature and potential of sacred groves as a social institution involving conserving communities. We comparatively analyse the contemporary dynamics of two *devban* in Kullu that have taken distinctly divergent trajectories in the last decades and which appear to exemplify the two extremes of the debate on sacred groves. One of these *devban* has become a model of conservation with the community involved strictly managing resource use and explicitly utilising a sacred as well as conservation discourse. This case also shows potential for becoming a sustainable model of community-based conservation. On the other hand, in our second case study, the *devban* has been commercially harvested in the last decade with community consent. Clearly, any conservation ethic is marginal to the existence of this sacred grove. Both these *devban* lie in the same valley, barely four kilometres away from each other as the crow flies. They share a common community-based religious belief system and institutional structures; have similar access to roads and markets and village economies that are considerably integrated into larger national markets. The political economic framework of state policy and market relations is also identical in the two cases. The divergent trajectories of these two *devban* together pose a challenge to any one-sided understanding of conserving communities. Simultaneously, they also present methodological challenges to generalisations about community-based conservation institutions.

Comparative study of these two *devban*, located in the same geographical and social space but having such divergent lifelines, raises a number of questions that do not admit simple answers following from commonly held notions about conserving communities: (a) How do local belief systems contribute to conservation (or lack thereof)? In our case, similar belief systems have resulted in different conservation outcomes. (b) What is the nature of linkage between nature-based subsistence livelihood practices and a conservation ethic? This question becomes significant in the context of Kullu because sacred groves are also a livelihood resource providing fuel and fodder. Answers to these questions require exploring the micro-politics of quotidian practices, the domain of immediate human *praxis* with all its fissures along conflicting interests and identities, and axes of hegemony providing it a structural, but complex unity. The other set of questions relate to the *long durree* of historical change in Kullu valley and specificities of the colonial and post-colonial political economies in this peripheral area. (c) In the long span of history what are the processes that challenge, transform or decimate 'traditional' institutions? *Devban* are a historic institution that has been sustained for many centuries. What has changed in recent decades to encourage their harvesting? On the other hand, there is some evidence that the *devban* of our study that has

become a conservation model today may not be so old, certainly not as old as the *devban* that was harvested. The current political economy while encouraging harvest of some *devban*, also provides incentives for their conservation, and even for formation of new *devban*. The last question has prime analytical significance. (d) Are there any identifiable trends emerging in the transformation of traditional conservation institutions? Contrasting outcomes of the two *devban* can be read as an absence of such trends. Our analysis shows that a reading like this is too simplistic. Presence of proximate and contingent causal factors does not imply absence of well delineated structural tendencies. The notion of a historical and society wide trend, or multiple trends, is an abstraction, and specific answers depend on the level of abstraction of questions related to such trends. Recent studies have already begun to question whether the colonial period or post-colonial period has had a unidirectional impact on communities or conservation. We add a dialectical dimension to this argument by showing how a historically evolved politico-economic structure simultaneously guides contrasting outcomes on ground.

There are no simple answers to any of these questions, and this limited research does not even propose to comprehensively answer any of them. Our attempt here is limited to disentangle some aspects of the complex network of social relations that converge on Kullu *devban* to illuminate possible answers. Our comparative study of two *devban* also raises a fundamental methodological issue. In recent years, the empirically grounded and historically situated studies of micro-politics have received considerable emphasis as a critique of simplistic political economy perspectives that often unduly emphasise macro factors to explain local changes and fall prey to generalised and dichotomous binary models of community vs. state, subsistence needs vs. market demands, etc. The new trend of critical studies has rightly highlighted the agency of local actors in transforming their environment and society.² However, our comparative study of two Kullu *devban* shows that it is problematic to make larger claims and decisions on political-ecological trends based on individual case studies and analysis of micro-politics alone. The contrasting fates of two *devban*, if considered in isolation, can lead to opposing claims and decisions. The way out of the puzzle lies in a methodology that is consciously aware of the rich nuances and shades of micro-politics as well as of broad trends of politics, economy and ideology; one that aims for analytical integrity by understanding the interrelations between the two allowing for their mutually constitutive natures. Paraphrasing Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 'localised human agents make their own social world, but they do not make it just as they please under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transformed under political, economic and discursive dynamics of broader dimensions'. The methodological challenge can be best met by infusing ethnographic insights of empirically grounded analyses with critical political economic perspectives.

Our analysis shows that the immediate fate of each *devban* is determined by decisions taken locally by the *devta* committee that manages *devta* affairs, and village community. Yet, although management decisions regarding them are taken locally and their effective management rests with locally constituted *devta* committees, the key influences determining their fate emanate from spheres of property regimes, state policy and an environmental discourse that originate beyond local community. The two key changes in property regimes that have decisively influenced *devban* were the transformation of an effectively communal *devta* property into private property under colonial land settlements, and the land reform programmes after independence that led to a complete divestment of *devta*'s agricultural lands. The latter left *devban* as the only remaining significant property of many *devta*. Since the prestige of a Kullu *devta* is associated more with other forms of possessions like temples, gold masks and ornaments, and chariots than with forests, there is an incentive to transform *devban* into other forms of sacred property. However, it should be noted that not all *devban* are legally recorded as private property; some of them are located in state forests. State policy in Himachal Pradesh has always considered forests an important resource to be kept under strict regulation. There are elaborate rules for harvesting private forests. However, the state also tends to distinguish *devban* from other private forests by establishing another set of special rules regarding their harvest. Here we see the making of an interesting conflict. Communities wishing to harvest their *devban* highlight and use the fact that according to a strict interpretation of their legal status *devban* are private property. However, sections of state policy consider them otherwise and formulate rules that make harvesting *devban* difficult. Other state policies related to self-governance and development as well as donor agency and NGO programmes also have a bearing on *devban* seen as a community resource. These policies and programmes provide new opportunities for association at the village level and attempt to recreate 'community'. In recent years the environmentalist turn in state policies and a similar thrust of donor agency and NGO work in the area have made conservation an important element in local discourse that can be used strategically in dealing with outside agencies. Changing production relations and modes of governance have created groups of influential men whose social power is based on non-traditional means. They have become significant local players in *devban* dynamics, either as members of an incipient capitalist class, who among other things are also involved in timber contracting, or as environmentally active and educated youth involved with local NGO work and elected to institutions of self-governance. Hence we see that emergent properties of political economy have fundamentally changed some characteristics of *devban* and are influencing them in varied ways. This influence on a historically and organically rooted institution like *devban* is not an external determination. Its mediated character means that it can best be described as a mutually constitutive embrace. Changes in the political economy are not leading to a unitary

outcome on the ground because its conflicting, mediated and underdetermined nature permits localised actors a multiplicity of interpretations, strategies and choices.

In the following section we discuss the major strands in the literature on sacred groves and conserving communities. The third section provides a brief introduction to *devban* in Kullu and their location in the rural society. This exploration is taken up in more specific detail in the following section which presents an ethnographic study of two *devban* that have taken different paths in the last decade. Following this we take a critical look at multiple factors that have influenced decision making in these two cases – changes in property regimes, state intervention, and local level processes. The final section brings us back to the complex and mutually constitutive relationship between conserving communities and wider political economic factors.

Theorising Conserving Communities

The literature on sacred groves has been predominantly descriptive, cataloguing the existence and prevalence of sacred groves, and positioning them as traditional, indigenous and community-based conservation sites (Gadgil 1975; Gadgil and Vartak 1976, 1981a, 1981b; Chandrakant et al. 1990; Chandrakant and Romm 1991; Induchoodan 1991; WWF 1996; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998; Malhotra et al. 2000; Tripathi 2001). Analytically, the archetypical status of sacred groves as traditional community conservation reserves is established by focusing on two obvious aspects – first, religious beliefs behind their origin, resource use rules and meanings to local communities, and second, the well-preserved state of forests in them. These two elements are then extrapolated to present sacred groves as inherently oriented towards biodiversity conservation and communities managing them as conserving communities. While these observations are significant in their own right and have contributed in highlighting sacred groves in dominant environmental discourse, the conception of sacred groves built on them has tended to be simplistic and ahistorical. It has resulted in under-theorisation of changes that are occurring in these institutions.

Recently this image of sacred groves has been critically examined (Roy Burman 1992; Freeman 1999; Kalam 1999), in consonance with changing perspectives in general community-based conservation literature (Agrawal and Gibson 1999, 2001; Jeffery 1999; Jeffery and Sundar 1999; Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2001). The earlier presumed link between a conservation ethic and management of sacred groves has been shown to be tenuous. With evidence from sacred groves in Karnataka, Kalam (1999: 39) has concluded that 'while in general, and in a loose manner, it is fine to say that the *devarakadus* have been preserved because of religious sanctions and injunctions, in practice, and at a pragmatic level, there is very little evidence to support this thesis'. During an elucidation of folk-models of forest environment in High-

land Malabar, Freeman (1999: 59) finds 'that the modern environmentalist's interest in floristic composition of biodiversity does not inform the institution and maintenance of sacred groves'. Alongside these studies that specifically question the conservation objective attributed to sacred groves, the broader community conservation literature has begun deconstructing 'community' (Li 1996; Agrawal and Gibson 1999)

Initial development studies looked at the idea of community within a modernist framework that saw traditional communities as impediments to modernisation. However, the widely perceived failure of state institutions in conserving natural resources has led to a reversal of opinion and community-based conservation is seen as panacea to the atrophy of state institutions (Robinson 1998; Rao and Kerr 2002). On the other hand, serious and substantial criticisms have been levelled against simplistic, ideal-typical, ahistorical and idolising readings of the concept of community. It has been shown that homogeneity, commonality of interests, solidarity, cohesion, persistence over time, -i.e. all characteristics associated with ideal 'community' are absent from social groups actually found engaged in resource use and management.³ The simple binary model of state-versus-community has been critiqued and it has been shown that both state and community are internally fractured. The picture of straightforward conflict between state and community has been replaced by a richer collage showing everyday forms of negotiations, resistance and blurring of state-society boundaries (Gupta 1995; Kumar and Vasan 1997; Saberwal 1999; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Vasan 2000, 2002). However, notwithstanding these valid criticisms, there exists a real feature of the actual practice of natural resource management in Himalaya that allows, and in fact demands, a concept that can best be called conserving communities. The world of resource management in the Himalaya includes a bewildering variety of social associations, which on the one hand are not voluntary associations of free individuals like civil society associations, nor are they directly under state control, nor do they function entirely under market rule. Considering only Himachal Pradesh, examples of such social associations include *devta* committees formed in pre-colonial times, informal arrangements among villagers and transhumant groups, forest cooperatives established during the colonial period and village forest committees formed recently with help from state, donor agencies and non-government organisations.⁴ Such associations are an integral part of rural life and it is to them that the label community is often attached. Without prejudging any characteristic of Kullu *devban* we consider them as instances of 'conserving communities' precisely in this way. We use the term 'conserving community' not as an analytic but a descriptive category.

We treat *devban* as socially rooted and historically evolved organic entities, important in their own right and not as a residual category left after parts of social life have been suitably portioned off to categories of modernity like state, market or civil society. They are not passive recipients of external influ-

ences; these influences are mediated by the internal properties of *devban*. Two significant aspects of Kullu *devban* have a bearing on any discussion regarding conserving communities. (i) In a place like Kullu where penetration of state forest department is more than a century old, *devban* constitute the only ecosystem whose management is still vested with local communities. (ii) *Devban* predate recent efforts towards community conservation. Hence many criticisms levelled against recently initiated project-sponsored institutions of community conservation are less valid against them.

Devban in Kullu

In the Western Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh (India) where this study was conducted, *devban* are particularly prevalent in the moist-temperate agro-ecological belt that runs from north-west to south-east. Kullu is a central district in this belt, with a 37% of area under forest (FSI 1998: 43) and a population density of 69 persons per sq. km (GoI 2001). The predominantly rural population has an agro-pastoral livelihood system, intimately dependent on adjacent forests. Kullu *devban* are generally Himalayan moist temperate forests typical in this region between 1600 and 3000 m altitude. The main trees found are *deodar* (*Cedrus deodara*), *kail* (*Pinus excelsa*), and oak (*Quercus incana*, *Q. dilatata*, *Q. semicarpifolia*) with occasional spruce (*Picea smithiana*) and silver fir (*Abies pindrow*).

Devban as a social institution reflect and reinforce existing social hierarchies of caste and gender. Kullu is predominantly Hindu with twenty eight per cent of population listed as Scheduled Castes in 2001 census. The main scheduled castes are Koli, Chamar and Luhar. These groups were predominantly landless before the state tenancy acts of early seventies. Tenancy acts provided some land to almost every one. In 1983 only 159 people in Kullu were identified as landless in official records (GoHP 1995: Table 2.17). While violent or overt caste confrontations are rare in Kullu, caste hierarchies and taboos are strongly maintained and caste plays an important role in everyday social interactions. Habitations of lower castes are generally separate from main village. Eating, marriage and ritual practices are major areas where taboos are strictly observed. *Devban* are located within this hierarchical social system and reinforce it. Even though *devta* is considered belonging to the entire community that includes lower castes, access to *devta* is determined by caste hierarchy. It is taboo for lower castes to touch *devta* or his/her paraphernalia. Inviting the *devta* to one's house during major life-cycle functions and special occasions is a common practice among upper castes. Lower castes may not take/invite the *devta* to their houses.

The affairs of *devta*, including their *devban*, are managed by a group of villagers organised as a *devta* committee headed by a hereditary *kardar*. Other committee members are a *bhandari* (store-keeper), a *kayatha* (cashier), a *pujari* (priest), one or more *gurs* (oracles) and several *bajantris* (musicians).

Only lower caste members of the *devta* committee are *bajantris* and *gurs* responsible for performing specific ritual services for the *devta*. The more important decision making members of the committee are all upper caste men, often from powerful village elite.

The rules of access and use of *devban* reflect prevalent caste and gender biases. Many *devta* committees specifically prohibit the entry of lower castes and married women in their *devban*. During annual fairs in some *devban*, lower castes are prohibited from entering the centre of festivities and are expected to remain in a designated separate area. Besides their ritual significance many *devban* are an important livelihood resource for concerned communities as places for grazing and fuel-wood and fodder collection. *Devban* prohibitions affect lower caste villagers adversely since they are often more dependent on public lands for non-timber forest produce, and they disproportionately affect women who are often responsible for the collection of fuel-wood and fodder.

A Tale of Two Devban

Bakhu Devban: A Conservation Ideal

Reputedly the best-preserved forest in Kullu is the *devban* of Bakhu Nag⁵ *devta* in the relatively remote Up-tukka village, which is a good two-hour climb from the road. Bakhu Nag is a snake-God. In the *devta* hierarchy of Kullu, BakhuNag is the body guard of Lakshminarayan *devta* of Tukka village, a *devta* based in the Great Tradition of Hinduism. As the names suggest, Up-tukka was once a sub-settlement of Tukka village, although it has an independent identity now. The older Tukka village does not have a *devban*. Bakhu *devban* is a clearly demarcated six hectare multi-storied forest with dense undergrowth of shrubs and grasses that is visually distinctive from surrounding forests. A large sign-board on the path to the forest announces the *devban* and lists various restrictions that must be observed. Married women and people of lower castes are requested not to enter. Entry of leather items, alcohol consumption and cigarette smoking are strictly prohibited. Grazing is banned, although collection of leaf litter is allowed.

The sign-board is a significant modern addition since among villagers it is only the current generation that can claim literacy. The rules however are followed diligently by residents of Up-tukka and neighbouring villages. The sign-board is also significant for another reason – it stands in a forest that is legally owned by the state. While this was not a commonly known or oft-stated fact, government records show these forests as undemarcated protected forests. Apart from the sign-board, Up-tukka has also seen other recent transformations. Since the early nineties, the cultivation and sale of cannabis and to a lesser extent opium has brought in significant cash income to many households. Cannabis is a profusely growing weed at this altitude and the

plant has many traditional local uses. However, in the last decade it has also been carefully cultivated and buyers from as far as Goa reach this village unconnected by road. This inflow of cash income has paralleled the increase in prestige of *devta* Bakhu Nag. Sometime in mid-nineties, the *devta* was taken to alpine meadows for rejuvenation and is believed to have returned with increased power. Villagers attribute the spate of good crops in last few years to *devta*'s heightened potency.

Another noticeable change is that villagers, particularly younger men, take pride in describing this particular *devban* to outsiders as a community conservation model. Forest conservation has become a common theme of public discussion as the region has witnessed a number of state-sponsored activities like the Joint Forest Management (JFM), eco-development projects, a national park, a sanctuary and also a massive hydro-electric project. While the influence of NGOs, researchers, consultants and Forest Department in creating an explicitly conservationist discourse is unmistakable, there is also an element of local pride in these assertions. Villagers are eager for influential visitors to visit and appreciate this *devban* as a dense jungle conserved by them. The notice board declaring this forest as a *devban* and delineating rules of use decided by the community can also be read as an effort to demark and establish the *devban* as a village forest conserved by local community.

Ringarishi *Devban*: Decimation of Sacred Property

Less than four kilometres away as the crow flies from Up-tukka village, but at least half a day's walk away, is the village Banaugi. The village is as distant from road as Up-tukka, but is larger, older, and more prosperous. This prosperity is based on irrigated and relatively flat land. Banaugi's *devta* is Ringarishi, embodiment of an ancient sage, which is much higher in the Kullu *devta* hierarchy than Bakhu Nag. The *devban* of Ringarishi is a moderately dense forest with several mature deodar trees. Unlike Bakhu Nag, whose sacred grove is on state forest land, Ringarishi *devta* legally owns his sacred grove as a private property.

On January 30, 1994, the *devta* committee of Ringarishi passed a resolution to harvest his *devban*. Two main arguments were presented in support of this decision. First argument was the *devta*'s needs. It was assessed that Rs. 2,400,000 was needed for repairing four *devta* temples and for setting up an orchard that would yield regular income. Second, it was argued that the *devban* was already depleting because people were illegally cutting trees and it would be best to get some benefit for the *devta* before it disappeared completely.

State permission is required for harvesting a *devban*. To deal with the state bureaucracy and obtain the requisite permissions, the *devta* committee gave power of attorney to a timber contractor from Mandi, a town sixty kilometres away. Forest policy allows harvest of trees in any area only during a harvest-

ing window that occurs once every ten years in the harvesting cycle. Ringarishi *devban* lies in an area where harvesting was open in 1993-94. For the harvest of Ringarishi *devban* all official formalities had to be completed within two months to meet the March 31st deadline. Notoriously slow Indian bureaucracy however responded with remarkable alacrity in this case. A day after the aforementioned *devta* committee resolution, the Himachal Pradesh Forestry Corporation (HPFC)⁶, sent a letter to the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) requesting him to demarcate trees for harvest. While asking his staff to complete this task, the DFO however demanded a report from the District Commissioner⁷ (DC) approving the need for temple renovation. The grove was found having 181 trees with 310.58 cu m timber and permission was given to harvest 40% of the total volume as per rules. The DC's no-objection letter was received on 28th March, and the DFO wrote to the timber contractor asking him to deposit the security money on the last day of the felling window. On the same day the timber contractor received permission from the HPFC to cut the marked trees.

After felling and depositing the harvested timber to the HPFC the contractor was paid Rs. 899,170. How much of this money actually reached the *devta* committee remains uncertain, although it is likely to be only a fraction of this amount. According to an undated letter written to the Kullu DC and the Banjar DFO by an elected official of a neighbouring village, the contractor paid Rs. 170,000 to the *devta* committee. According to the writer of this letter the agreement between the *devta* committee and the contractor stipulated a payment of Rs. 290,000 for 124 cu m timber. He surmised that there had been bungling and requested an enquiry.

The story of Ringarishi *devban* did not end with harvesting twenty six trees in 1994. A year later, the contractor attempted to harvest the remaining trees taking recourse to a judicial order that directs the government to allow clear-felling of private forests if the owner wishes to establish an orchard. The Forest Department however appeared unwilling to allow clear felling. It also argued that the felling cycle for the area was already over. The contractor approached civil bureaucracy and managed to get a letter sent from the Finance-Commissioner-cum-Secretary of the Himachal Pradesh government in February 1999. This letter granted 'deviation permission' to cut trees in the year 1998-99 which was outside the felling window and asked the forest department to mark trees for harvest. However, all formalities could not be completed before the expiration of deviation permission, and that saved the remaining trees of Ringarishi *devban*. Nevertheless, the first successful harvesting of this *devban* encouraged applications for harvesting two other sacred groves in the area.

The divergent transformations occurring in the two *devban* on the one hand are based on the unique composition and local politics of each village community. However, this divergence has also been made possible by broader political economic factors such as the transformation of property regimes,

various state interventions and changing discursive arenas in which environmental arguments are becoming increasingly important. These changes which have occurred over a longer period of time and their influence on these two *devban* are discussed in the following sections.

Devban and the Transformation of Property Regimes

There is some evidence that in pre-colonial times in Himachal Pradesh wastelands belonged to kings. On the other hand, sacred groves were one category of forests that did not belong to the king.⁸ In medieval India, gifts to deities and religious institutions were an integral element of feudal Hindu statecraft and such gifts were signifiers of independence, sovereignty and overlordship.⁹ In Kullu, King Jagat Singh (1637–1662) gifted his kingdom to deity Raghunathji (Vashishth n.d.: 6) and since then kings ruled as trustees of the deity. Hence it is possible that some Kullu *devban* were gifts given to deities by kings. However, it is also likely that as Kullu kings expanded their kingdom during fifteenth to seventeenth centuries by conquering small neighbouring principalities¹⁰ they consolidated their hegemony by accepting the ownership of local deities over pre-existing *devban*. Before the advent of colonial state, every village *devta* had rent free land grants (Harcourt 1982). Villagers who performed special services for *devta* worked these lands as tenants after paying a rent. *Devta*'s resources, including his *devban*, were in effect communal resources that were used for fairs hosted by *devta*. Such fairs extended for days and involved community feasting, drinking and dancing.

Zeal of colonial state in assigning stable property rights, especially to land which formed the basis of its administration and taxation, resulted in most of the communally managed *devta* land being legally classified as private property of *devta*. *Devta* were hence given legal identity as private property owners, and their *devban* became private forests. Since a non-physical *devta* could obviously not function as a real property owner he was legally considered a minor and *kardar* was recognised as manager of his properties. *Nabaalig* (minor) status of *devta* symbolised the end of an era in which they were at the centre of communal life. Already in 1850s according to A.F.P. Harcourt, the first Assistant Commissioner of Kullu, only seventy to eighty minor *devta* were coming to the annual *Dussehra* mela, whereas earlier it was claimed that over three hundred *devta* used to come (Harcourt 1982).

Post-independence developments led to far-reaching changes in the property status of *devta*. The Land Ceiling Act (1951) intended to break up feudal landed estates and the Tenancy Act (1974), which gave occupancy rights to tenants, divested *devta* of their agricultural lands. While in other parts of India feudal landlords fought pitched legal battles and were able to blunt land reform legislation, *devta* of Kullu were in a peculiar situation because the very group of people that looked after their affairs was the primary beneficiaries of divestment of their property. Hence, divestment of their agricultural land was

thorough. At present, except voluntary donations by devotees and small government grants, *devta* have few other sources of income.

Today most *devta* have wealth in the form of ornaments and temple structures, and some of them have forests. Temples and ornaments have direct ritual significance and are also an index of prestige. Status of a *devta* in the *devta* hierarchy of Kullu is zealously asserted and guarded by his followers and a *devta* committee is supposed to do all it can to sustain and enhance *devta*'s prestige. This is usually done by repairing and building temples, buying gold masks and ornaments and organising visits of *devta* to the yearly Dusshera festival at Kullu town. Except animistic and naturalistic *devta*, others do not have direct association with forests. *Devta* higher in the hierarchy, such as Lakshmi Narayan of Tukka, have no *devban*. But one of his deputies in the religious hierarchy, Bakhu Nag of Up-tukka village, has a well-preserved *devban*. With the market price of trees like deodar skyrocketing to over Rs. 10,000 per cubic meter, there is strong pressure to transform forest wealth to other forms which contribute to *devta* prestige and result in regular income.

However, *devban* are unlikely to be harvested if conversion of standing timber to a more effective sacred property of *devta* was the sole incentive. In a place like Kullu where an incipient local capitalist class¹¹ has begun to amass wealth only in the past two decades, conversion of *devban* to marketable commodity is also a conduit to primitive accumulation through which communal resources are entering private property networks. Much of the profits realised through sale of *devta* property enter private circulation as in the case of Banaugi *devban*. The increasing interest in harvesting *devban* in Kullu in the last decade has paralleled the emergence of influential villagers with access to bureaucratic and political power and sufficient capital to start varied entrepreneurial activities including timber contracting. Local contractors, who stand to gain maximum from timber harvest, and have the ability to influence *devta* committee are one definite reason behind this process.

Entirely different set of social relations become operative when a *devban* is on government-owned land. Restriction on green felling of state forests in Himachal Pradesh means that there is little likelihood of such *devban* being harvested. These *devban* are potential sites for overt and covert conflict between state and local community on the one hand, and within local community on the other. Use of timber for temple repairs, poles for putting up structures, and fuel-wood for communal cooking during the annual and periodical *devta* fairs are considered by local community to be a legitimate and primary use of *devban*. However, some of these activities may be illegal or require special permissions according to forest laws depending on the category of state forest containing *devban*. The embedding of lower level state forest bureaucracy in rural society in Himachal means that such conflicts rarely become overt (Vasan 2002). Many usufruct rights of women and lower caste in non reserved state forests are prohibited in these *devban*. This selec-

tive discrimination against women and persons of lower castes is also illegal. Since these rights arise legally from state regulation there is in theory a potential for conflict between state and community on this point too. However, as most usufruct rights are enjoyed by local people only, any conflict between them and sacred status of a *devban* is in practice likely to act itself out within community along channels determined by gender and caste-based hegemony of local power structures.

Regulating *Devban*: Direct and Indirect State Intervention

State policy in a variety of sectors affects social and ecological sustainability of *devban*. Impact of property law and land legislation introduced by colonial and post-colonial states has already been highlighted. Policies and rules regarding *devban* and timber harvests have an obvious direct impact on the state of *devban*. In addition, state directives on local governance and the *Panchayati Raj* system also exert indirect influence. Significantly, the role of state is not limited to setting up of laws and rules, but includes local perception of its legitimacy, its power to implement laws, scale of corruption facilitating contravention of laws and a flexible interpretation of laws for 'exceptional' circumstances. All this means that the actual implementation of specific policies is always an under-determined process realised through multiple tensions.

Pre-colonial state land grants to *devta* and the colonial state's efforts at codifying and legally privatising *devta* property mark the first stages of state attempts at regulating *devban*. The creation of Forest Department and its increasing influence as an arm of state has a decisive impact on *devban*. The Forest Department regulates harvesting of all trees in including those on private land. Trees on any land can be harvested only during designated felling cycle windows that occur once every ten years. The Forest Department permission including an assessment of environmental impact, is essential before any harvest. Actual felling, transportation and sale of the timber is done by the HPFC or its designated contractors, who give a part of the sale proceeds (50% to 70%) after subtracting expenses to the tree owner. The entire process of harvesting private forests is so complicated that private owners generally give power of attorney to local timber contractors who deal with state bureaucracy on their behalf. An unwritten rule is that the HPFC gives the contract for harvesting and transporting timber only to those contractors who have received power of attorney from tree owners. The state-regulated harvesting procedure makes timber contractors a powerful group whose stake lies in forest liquidation. Increasingly, economically and politically prominent villagers are turning to this occupation.

Earlier, there were accusations that *kardars* had harvested *devban* for private gain. Following this, the state government issued a set of guidelines in 1990. Field inspection by the DC before harvesting has been made compulsory and profit from sale can be used only for maintenance and repair of tem-

ples. Before harvesting, the *devta* committee has to submit documents with estimated costs of temple repairs to the DC, who has to confirm the facts and give a 'no-objection' certificate to the DFO of concerned forest division. After harvesting also, the *devta* committee has to furnish documents related to repair expenses to the DC. Through these elaborate rules the state attempts to emphasise its authority over these forests while also attempting to treat them as communal property wherever possible. The *devta* committees wishing to harvest *devban* on the other hand assert their private property status, as seen in the case of Ringarishi *devban*. The power and influence of the state and bureaucracy lie not only in ensuring that these rules are followed but also in giving a flexible interpretation to them. For instance, in 1999 four *devta* committees in one forest division in Kullu district had requested permission to harvest their *devban*. None of these could get their felling order within the felling cycle window when harvesting was officially allowed in the area mainly because of delay in completing all formalities. However, there is a provision for granting special 'deviation permission' for timber harvesting outside the felling cycle. This is given by the highest level authorities, often after directions from elected representatives. Out of four cases, one *devban* had got this permission while the other three were in the process of getting it. Need for deviation permission in all cases shows that without politically well-connected contractors and *kardars*, harvesting of *devban* would be very difficult. On the reverse side, ability to get deviation permission is a political asset of such men, who then use it for other interests as well.

A recent trend in Indian state also impacts *devban*. The past decade has witnessed a formal 'greening' of the Indian state.¹² While actual effects of policies and legal initiatives vary from place to place and may in fact be marginal, they do create a conservation-oriented mindset in bureaucracy simply out of fear of complications that may arise from taking a proactive decision. If left to bureaucratic prerogatives alone, without interference from other interests, it is likely that the status quo would be preserved with respect to *devban*. This was demonstrated by the DC of Kullu in 1999 who refused permission for harvesting *devban*, passed the responsibility to the Forest Department and claimed ignorance of the very statutes that gave him power to grant permission.

Another direct intervention of state in *devta* institutions is through government grants to *devtas* in order to attend annual Dussehra celebrations in Kullu town. While these celebrations are a fairly old practice, the process has transformed conspicuously. Before independence, local people accompanying *devta* to the fair received material assistance from *devta* income. When land reform regulations after independence dried up *devta* income sources, the fair practically came to an end. It was revived after government started giving grants to *devta* to come to Kullu for the Dussehra fair. In 1995 grants worth Rs. 2 46,307 were distributed among 119 *devta* (Thakur n.d.: 10–11). Many villagers now expect and demand government grants to cover expenses for

bringing their *devta* to Kullu. With increasing tourist interest in the event, state has also been willing to pay for the continuance of this tradition while local people are becoming increasingly disinterested in voluntary participation. This indicates transformation of a local custom into an externally driven and state-supported practice. Similarly, there is increasing external interest in preservation of *devban*, both as forests and as social institutions. The form and sustainability of *devban* in future may thus be shaped considerably by state policy and social interests external to the local society that controlled them till recently. These broader influences however remain in constant dialectical tension with local processes that we discuss next.

Devban and Local Processes

Kullu *devta* are territorially bounded entities. Their primary association is with a village or group of villages that form a community linked by faith in the particular *devta*. In fact, one could argue that with the dissolution of feudal polity after colonialism, the territorially delimited character of *devta* has become more marked. Hence *devban*, which are but one symbol of the religious authority of *devta*, are localised not just geographically, but also institutionally and ideologically. This fact implies that they cannot be immune from the whirlwind of village level local processes. By local processes we mean those social, economic, political or ideological processes which act themselves out primarily at the level of a locality, even if their logic, programme or direction is dictated or influenced by forces outside the locality. Subsistence-oriented appropriation of local natural resources, localised institutions of governance, sources and strategies of internal hegemony within community and discursive terrain of communal life are the primary arena of these processes. A very important fact relevant for *devban* is that in recent past these processes have initiated a simultaneous dissolution and re-creation of community. For instance, *devta* do not occupy the centre of everyday communal life to the extent they did earlier. Migration and occupational changes, increasing socio-economic linkages outside the locality and market ideology are dissolving communal life. Simultaneously however, decentralised institutions of local governance based on elective democratic principles, development policies and ideologies that create local institutions such as Self-Help Groups, Women's Groups, Village Forest Committees, and local efforts to both appropriate and oppose these policies are recreating local community on the basis of new principles of association and axes of hegemony.

This re-creation of community and its changing *raison d'être* affects *devban* directly. Even though state law defines them as private or state property and hence outside the purview of communal life, they remain community forests in local discourse. In principle, all decisions regarding a *devban* are decisions of *devta*. However, *devta* committees go to considerable length to ensure legitimacy of their decisions. In many cases legitimacy is attempted

and also challenged through secular arguments. For instance, one *kardar* argued that the money earned from harvesting *devban* will be used to buy a fleet of lorries which would help overcome local transportation problems and give employment to local youth. An elected official of the village argued against *devban* harvest by asking 'For what does *devta* need money? He does not have to look after a family like us'. Another argument against harvesting is that forest resources are depleting and women have to go ever further to collect fuel-wood and fodder; harvesting *devban* will accentuate the problem. More directly, another elected official voiced the need to take a decision on *devban* harvesting in an open village meeting. The *devta* should be asked for his consent only if this meeting approved harvesting.

Formation of local institutions of governance has allowed permeation of competitive politics to the lowest level. This change along with spread of modern education and media has meant that practices like elections and corruption and notions of public and popular mandate have entered social life irrevocably, even if only partially. These have allowed a newer and more articulate class of men to assert their views and authority over local affairs through their association with para-local institutions and ideologies. These groups of men are sufficiently conversant with state policies and practices to allow them to influence them. These men, for instance, can initiate and see through bureaucratically cumbersome procedures for harvesting *devban*. Their influence, however, need not always be deleterious. The board that announces the Bakhu *devban* and gives it an air of formality was established by a college going youth who also happened to be an elected village official.

A noteworthy development in recent years has been the emergence of a conservation centred discourse. While realisation of forest degradation locally has certainly played a role, the influence of state policies and donor funded programmes has also been significant. The Kullu region has not experienced any popular movement like Chipko in the neighbouring state of Uttaranchal. Nevertheless, the region has not remained immune from it. The element best appropriated from Chipko seems to be an assertion of villagers' natural right to forests against state authority and a claim that they are better at conservation than state. On the other hand, Kullu is also a target of 'state environmentalism'. Kullu was one of the two districts in Himachal Pradesh where Joint Forest Management was started in 1992. The upper reaches of Sainj and Tirthan valleys in Kullu were declared the Great Himalayan National Park in 1982. The Park authorities instituted a number of Eco-Development Committees in villages along the park boundary. Many local NGOs have also built their activities around programmes of conservation and sustainable use. While the value of *devban* in many of its earlier forms has declined, recent conservation discourse provides opportunities granting it a new status.

Devban can be and are presented to external interests as an example and proof of community's ability to conserve, an example of native and traditional environmentalism, notwithstanding harvest of some *devban* that provides con-

trary evidence. In the case of Bakhu *devban* for instance, it has provided opportunity to educated village youth to create networks with conservationists, documentary film makers, non-governmental organisations and researchers who are keen to record and highlight traditional/indigenous/community conservation successes. It also serves as a convincing argument that villagers can use to oppose policies for state take-over of local natural resources. *Devban* have thus become a new type of resource that at least some villagers can use to their own and their community's advantage in interactions with institutions and individuals who enter villages bearing new interests.

CONCLUSION

This study started with a conundrum: Why do two Kullu *devban* sharing the same geographical and social space have such different fates? One is an ideal of community based conservation while the other suffered decimation by the decisions of the very community responsible for managing it. An ethnographic study of the two *devban* opens up a social world very different from idealised accounts of conserving communities. On the one hand this world is an arena for locally grounded social agents to manage, recreate, and also decimate, *devban* under purely local motivations stemming from religious beliefs, caste and gender inequities and livelihood requirements. However, this world of local actors has never been closed. Even in the sphere of religion, the territorially bounded local deities of Kullu are also part of a district wide *devta* hierarchy that most likely once mirrored feudal polity. More often than not, prestige of a *devta* is a competitive arena requiring possession of diverse forms of sacred property. If one looks more closely at the specific actions of *devta* committees managing affairs of the two *devban*, then it becomes clear that in some very important ways the terrain of their actions is already structured by the wider political economy. In particular, recent changes in *devban* cannot be understood without an appreciation of changes in property regimes, state policies and bureaucratic practices, and a deepening environmentalist discourse. The political economy of Kullu *devban* is complex. It has multiple factors, some of which reinforce each other while others are locked in mutual conflict. This political economy is underdetermined with possibilities of multiple interpretations (including the so called 'deviation permission' granted at the highest level of state bureaucracy), it is dynamic with a continually evolving legal, political, economic and discursive framework, which, very importantly, provides opportunities to reconstitute local communities along new principles of association and axes of hegemony. The net influence of this political economy in diverse local contexts is rarely identical. Hence the contrasting fate of two *devban* is not surprising.

We have argued that despite many valid criticisms of the analytical utility of the concept of conserving communities, the actual practice of resource management in Himachal involves varied associations of villagers that can

only be described as conserving communities. In our work it is an empirical category whose exact character in different instances can be ascertained by empirical research only, rather than following from a unique set of mutually consistent properties.

In conservation literature, the so-called Standard Environmental Narrative sees homogenous conserving communities as one pole in a binary model, pitted against an authoritarian state–market–commercial complex at the other pole. This second generation of environmental studies emerged in response to the first wave that saw state intervention as the solution to environmental catastrophe supposedly caused by rural communities. The third wave¹³ of academic research on environmental issues made a conscious move away from the meta-narrative of binary models to more place-based specific studies of micro-politics and has pointed to internal stratification and oppression within communities. The methodology of much of this criticism has been informed by analyses that start from concrete historical and empirical instances. These analyses are grounded, textured, nuanced and produced a dynamic picture of a contested local social reality. However, the very emphasis on micro-politics and the multiplicity of agents tends to block an adequate critique of the binary model in as much as it obfuscates an appreciation of structural properties of social, economic and political relationships that, in fact, play a role in the very constitution of social agents.

In our study, the Kullu *devban* emerge as institutions in constant communication and negotiation with state and market. Dichotomies like local/non-local and traditional/modern are eroded as market demand, state laws and forest policy and an environmental consciousness with roots beyond the local community enter inner vitals of a community and modify its social space, including its *devban*. This embeddedness of institutions rooted in local history and community in the wider political economy is a critical analytical challenge for any study of local institutions like *devban*. This study has attempted to meet this challenge by a synthesis of ethnographic insight with critical political economic perspectives.

In a span of less than two centuries the political economy of rural Kullu has changed from feudal-subsistence to colonial, to capitalist with election-based political processes. During this transition the role of *devta* has changed from being at the centre of local communal life to a ‘*nabaalig*’ landowner in colonial property records to the current situation in which Kullu *devta* interact with a number of secular institutions. During this period the valued form of *devta* property has also changed from being communal to a purely ritual one. However, all these changes have not eclipsed *devta* and associated institutions. Rather they retain local significance and in some cases, like the Bakhu *devban*, their significance has increased in recent past. The future, as the saying goes, is always open with unanticipated possibilities. Given the politico-economic characteristics of Kullu *devban*, one thing however is fairly certain.

The fate of other *devban* in Kullu will be, more likely than not, as diverse as that of the Bakhu Nag and Ringarishi *devban*.

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Notes

1. We use the local Hindi term *devban* for Kullu sacred groves and *devta* for village-based deities throughout this study. As in normal Hindi usage, words *devban* and *devta* denote both singular and plural numbers. By the term *devban* we imply both the physical patches of forest that have been accorded a sacred status and also the set of social institutions, including the belief systems that have a direct role in their management.
2. See Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan (2001) for an excellent collection of such studies.
3. For some recent examples see Baviskar (1999), Jackson and Chattopadhyay (2001), Ludden (2001).
4. For a detailed discussion on these various institutional arrangements in Himachal Pradesh, see Vasan 2006.
5. All proper names used here are pseudonyms to protect the identity of respondents.
6. HPFC is a state government enterprise which has a monopoly over harvesting and sale of timber in the state.
7. The highest civil officer in the district.
7. For instance, notice the following observation of H. Cleghorn, an early colonial forest official made in 1864, 'The deodar forests of Upper Sutlej are the property of the Rajah of Bus-sahr, with the exception of the ancient groves adjoining the village temples...' Cleghorn (2001: 34).
8. For instance Dirks (1987: 429) infers from his study of South Indian kingship, 'From at least the eighth century one of the fundamental requirements of Indic kingship was that the king be a munificence provider of fertile lands to the following: to Brahmins ...; to temples ...; and to *cattirams*...'. Also see Inden (1977), Dirks (1976, 1992: 179–180).
9. Expansion of Kullu kingdom continued up to 1688 when Man Singh acquired Bara Bangahal, Chhota Bangahal, parts of Mandi to Drang salt mines, Spiti and fixed boundary with Laddakh at Lingti plains.
10. See Kumar and Vasan (1997), for a description and discussion of the emergence of this class in a sub valley of Kullu.
11. The Forest Conservation Act, 1980, the only forest Act enacted after independence is distinctly conservation-oriented providing the central government considerable control over how forest resources are used. Several rulings of the Supreme Court (for instance the famous Godavarman case (2002/95)) also provide considerable power to the state to control forests supposedly for conservation.
12. In the Foreword to Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan (2001), James Scott calls this literature the third wave of environmental analysis.

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