

Priestly Purity: Status Competition in the Tribal Margins

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Abstract

This article analyzes the tribal aspirations of Sippis, traditionally a wool shearing caste closely associated with Gaddis. Sippis have different administrative classifications across three districts in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu. In most contexts, they self identify as part of the Gaddi tribe. In this regard, they are not alone; four other caste groups, partially integrated into Gaddi life, make similar claims of tribal belonging. They argue that Gaddis are a caste heterogeneous tribal community with entrenched forms of casteism and ritual exclusion. Some identify with the neologism “Scheduled Tribe Dalit” to reflect their intersectionality as both marginalized Dalits and tribal people. Sippis, however, demand tribal inclusion along different ideological lines, often de-emphasizing tribal casteism, and emphasizing status equivalence with Gaddi Rajputs and Brahmins. Sippis generally reject their subordination as landless peasants and unfree clients under patronage exploitation, a narrative central to many other self identifying Gaddi Dalits. In doing so, Sippis separate themselves from other Gaddi identifying caste groups as they appeal for Scheduled Tribe status in Kangra. Based on 22 months of fieldwork, I analyze the ideologies of Sippi exceptionalism in the domains of pilgrimage, ritual practice, vocational lifestyle, and belief. The widespread recognition of Sippis as the highest status group among Scheduled Caste Gaddis, both in terms of self stylization and tribal social acceptance, accounts for villages where lower status groups have legally changed their caste certificates to become Sippi. Attention to how reservation shapes spirituality has broader implications for the anthropology of affirmative action across South Asia.

Keywords

Reservation; pilgrimage; tribalization; myth; “Scheduled Tribe Dalit”

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Introduction

Scholars of reservation (affirmative action) in India have exhaustively studied the “social life” of political categories; they have also studied how state recognition shapes subject formation (Galanter 1984; Bengt 2013; Shah and Shneiderman 2013). However, they have paid less attention to how reservation shapes spirituality and, vice versa, how spirituality is instrumentalized through social discourses, collective memories, and mythoreligious practices congruent with the inclusion criteria for state quotas.¹ Focusing on the recursivity of spirituality and communal aspirations for tribal recognition is functionalist without being reductive. The sociopolitical and spiritual are mutually reinforcing domains; among Scheduled Caste (SC) Gaddis, social marginalization, perceived political misrecognition, and ritual exclusions are interpenetrating realities that broadly provide the context for a heightened experience of malign black magic (Christopher 2022a; Simpson 2023) and for conversions to Arya Samaj (Christopher 2022b), Protestantism (Christopher 2022c), and Radhasoami. It provides a useful analytic lens for understanding how branching spiritualities reflect the processes of status contestation, stigma management, and communal aspiring vis-à-vis the promises of reservation quotas.

The analysis that follows revolves around a core theme of this special issue: the long-standing and ever-shifting complexity of Gaddi tribal belonging in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu. The Gaddis are officially a Scheduled Tribe (ST), a high-caste community of over 200,000, popularly known in India as the paradigmatic transhumant pastoralists of the Western Himalayas. Their distinctive vocational mobility, dialect, customary dress, and cosmology—paired with the perpetuation of colonial stereotypes about their tribal naiveté and laidback hookah-smoking pastoralism—are central markers of their tribal identity. Gaddi Rajputs and Brahmins in Kangra received ST recognition in 2002, after a multi-decade effort for tribal inclusion (Kapila 2008).

However, five Gaddi-identifying low-caste groups did not. Those caste groups remain mired in the overly competitive SC quota—despite sharing many features of Gaddi culture and dialect, living in Gaddi villages, self-identifying as Gaddi, and organizing several grassroots ethnopolitical movements for formal inclusion (Christopher 2020a).² These partially integrated SC Gaddis have shared experiences of tribal casteism (Phillimore 2023) and political misrecognition; as a result, they have founded several ethnic associations petitioning for universal tribal enfranchisement (most notably the Himalaya Gaddi Union).

However, Sippis, classified as SC in Kangra, reject the Dalit politics and strategic essentialisms at the center of many ethnopolitical campaigns and pursue Gaddi tribal inclusion on the grounds of their priestly purity. Sippi-specific tribal associations (most notably the *Gaddi Sippy Utthān Sansthā* or “Gaddi Sippi Uplift Organization”) actively exclude other Gaddi Dalits; they contrast Sippi Brahminical *gotras* (fictive clans), *kul purohit* (family priests), *celā* (spirit healer) shamanic functions, and deified caste ancestors with the polluting disqualifications of Halis (plowers, animal skin workers, and village witchdoctors), Dhogris (sedentary slate miners), Badis (woodworkers), and Rihare (musicians, sometimes Muslim). Sippi self-presentation emphasizes equivalent social status with Gaddi Rajputs, the reference group, and priestly functions analogous to or superseding those of Gaddi Brahmins, oftentimes called Bhattas. This is the ideological crux of the Sippi petition for tribal inclusion. Contrary to all other Gaddi Dalits—whose struggle for ST recognition axiomatically accepts their subordination as landless tenants and unfree clients under patronage exploitation—Sippis have taken the metaphorical high ground, deemphasizing caste discrimination, and claiming tribal status–equality.

This article examines the instrumentalization of Sippi spirituality—specifically, how ideologies around priestly functionaries, shamanism, wool shearing, ethnogenesis, and mytho-religious practices like

pilgrimage—are central to Sippi claims of caste purity and de facto justifications for Gaddi tribal inclusion. This entails not merely attending to social discourses; such cultural practices have led to Halis (the perceived lowest status SC Gaddis, often associated with Chamars) legally changing their caste name to “Sippi” to marginally raise their social status.

Sippi exceptionalism has also balkanized the collective power of Gaddi Dalit ethnopolitical movements as they struggle for ST inclusion in Kangra. The caste fissures between different SC Gaddis stymie their shared interest in resisting dominant Gaddi ideologies and establishing a caste-heterogeneous, multicultural tribal order. Rather than swapping the spiritual hegemonies that garner localized social prestige for the collective pursuit of enfranchising all Gaddi Dalits, Sippis lean into the ethnologic of state recognition. By molding themselves into and around Gaddi discourses and colonial-era tribal criteria, Sippis often pursue tribalizing strategies at the expense of the broader tribal Dalit movement in the Western Himalayas.

Misremembering to Counteract Misrecognition

Sippis are unique among SC Gaddis for advancing the oral narrative of forced migration from Lahore. A prominent Sippi activist began:

It was in the time of Aurangzeb. He had decided, just as a small matter—something decided before breakfast—to round up thousands of Hindus and burn their sacred threads. His goal was to collect 40 kilograms of thread and to change their religion. At that time, the shepherds living in that region fled to Meeru Varma [in Bharmaur] for refuge. We Sippis were included.

This is a creative variation of the Gaddi saying *Ujreya Lahore, te baseya Bharmaur* (After Lahore was destroyed, Bharmaur was inhabited) (Handa 2005: 29), typically told by high-caste Gaddis as both a justification

for their un-indigeneity and a humblebrag of their Hindu devotion. It is more than a rhyming echo from a speculative past; it is a collective Gaddi remembrance that gatekeeps out Gaddi Dalits and lingers over the ethnic interface with Muslims (Thapar 2007 191). Some Halis, whose ancestral conversions to the Arya Samaj are collectively forgotten, counter the Lahore discourse with their own Aryan discourse—scions of the purest nomadic pastoralists of Central Asia (Christopher 2022a: 21). Sippis advance their inclusion in the Lahore narrative as evidence of their Gaddi-ness.

However, such an account contradicts contemporary historiography about the subordination of indigenous communities, Sippis included, as Gaddis practiced transhumance between Bharmour and Kangra and adopted internal social stratifications from sedentary agriculturalists.³ It also contradicts colonial conjecture, of great utility for Gaddi Dalits, about the autochthony of low-status groups (later called Dalits) in the Dhauladhar mountains. This dramatically departs from the Gaddi Dalit strategy of embracing indigeneity as a marker of tribal authenticity within the pan-Himalayan regime of international rights promoted by the United Nations (UN) and nongovernmental organizations (NGO). When I pressed this point to my interlocutor, he directed me to a passage from a Sippi-commissioned auto-ethnographic report:

[B]efore the Aryans entered Bharmour district, some minor (*anāry*) castes also used to live here. Considering them as bandits (*dasyu*), the Aryans captured them. Certainly, these castes—Koli, Dagi, Hali, Dhogri—must have lived here and the people of the Gaddi community came from outside of this district.

These “minor castes” do not include Sippis. The foremost importance of lumping Sippi migration history into the dominant Gaddi narrative is that it affirms authentic Gaddi-ness as tied to migration and mobility and contrasted with Gaddi Dalits belonging to

peripheral, scattered castes indigenous to the mountains. Migration histories have ideological force that buttresses discourses about rights and belonging; as such, Sippis align themselves with dominant tropes of Gaddi identity and place their appeal for tribal inclusion in implicit contrast with rabble-rousing, ex-bandit Dalit castes.

Second, Sippis appropriate the theme of religious purity—of preserving Hindu ritual and identity—from the Gaddi migration history and repurpose it for self-fashioning as high-status shamanic ritual functionaries. Whereas Hali auto-ethnographies emphasize their “tribal” past as indigenous forest-dwelling omnivores and animists, the Sippis align themselves with tropes of Hindu-preserving, mobile pastoralists. Like Odysseus’s flight from Polyphemus, Sippis hope to reach their goal clinging to the underside of sheep.

This discursive framing of Sippi ritual purity has scholarly undertones. Ethnic entrepreneurs have mined colonial texts and academic monographs to cross-reference and substantiate the religious centrality of Sippis. This has at times led to exaggerations and misquotations. Nevertheless, surprisingly inventive forms of self-presentation have sprung from auto-ethnological reports and village reeducation projects into the hearts and minds of Sippis—modes of identification that are routinely scoffed at by Gaddis.

First, in opposition to the “commonsense” view among Gaddis that the ethnonym “Sippi” is derivative of either *śilpī* (craftwork) or *silānā* (sewing), many Sippis trace their caste etymology to a *tadbhav* (corruption) of “Shiva” himself. This direct association with Shiva emphasizes their high status as ritual functionaries and the spiritual underpinnings of sheep shearing and thread spinning. Instead of emphasizing their subsidiary role in the Gaddi pastoral economy, Sippis frame their ritual function as central to tribal practice, and Gaddis as dependent clients.

Second, ethnic entrepreneurs speculate about the etymological links between

“Sippi” and cognate Shiva-worshipping groups, gaining prestige through vague association. Citing the 1872 *Hindu Tribes and Castes as Represented in Benares* by the Anglican missionary M.A. Sherring, the historical link between Shivchari and Sippi is explored. The Shivchari allegedly resided at Jangambari and Kedarghat and worshiped Shiva by bathing in ashes, wearing his image, and donning a *rūdrāksh* (which translates as “Shiva’s teardrops”) or meditation necklace. Further etymological corruptions are mentioned, specifically “Shibbi” and “Siddhi,” mystical beings gifted with supernatural powers through devotion to Shiva. These seemingly self-negating hypotheses about caste origination—how Sippis were undifferentiated Gaddis who fled Lahore and Banarasi ascetics and Himalayan mystics—are easily reconciled. After settling in Brahmapur, a Gaddi family dispute (related below) led to ethnogenesis and the slow spread of Sippis throughout North India.

In the Gaddi world, straddling both sides of the Dhauladhar Mountains, there is an axiomatic perception among Gaddi Dalits that Jhandhar (the Kangra side) offers unique forms of socioeconomic aspiration (Phillimore 2014). Dharamsala stands apart as a beacon of modernity and cosmopolitan promise; the wider district of jumbled village caste configurations, described as “mixed up” due to migrations and caste emendations, provide liberative spaces of autonomy and anonymity. Although Halis struggle with the legacy of their patronage exploitation, there is near-universal agreement that caste discrimination is more strongly felt in ancestral villages in Chamba (traditionally called Gadderan and juxtaposed with Jhandhar). Kuarsi and Chunhota are obvious examples where the spatial layout of village life—access to pastureland, temples, and water sources—remains prohibitory to Dalit Gaddis. Kangra Halis are clear-eyed about the tenacity of Gaddi caste strictures in Gadderan; they interpret their subordination by Gaddis as evidence not of their apartness but of their partial integration into caste-heterogeneous tribal life.

In strong contrast, Kangra Sippis remember life in Gadderan with nostalgia, where their ancestors are imagined to have occupied prominent roles and equivalent social status with Gaddis. In an auto-ethnographic report commissioned by the *Gaddi Sippy Utthaan Sansthaa*, Bharmour is described as “woven from the natural beauty and geographical contrasts of several castes sharing a single language, social tradition and culture.” Instead of emphasizing caste inequality, Bharmouri life is described in ahistorically egalitarian terms: a place where “people maintain trust in helping each other; [where] each caste has tried to develop a living society without caste discrimination; [where] life swings gleefully (*ullās*) like a musical.” Instead of highlighting caste-based exclusions, Bharmouri life is imagined as “inclusive” (*sammilit*), where “happiness and suffering are distributed across the whole Gaddi community.” Regardless of caste, Gaddis demonstrate “*aṭūṭ* (unbreakable) trust and respect toward each other.” Such descriptions are littered with high Hindi, written by the president of an ethnic association to the Himachal Pradesh legislature and borrowing colonial tropes from the old Gazetteers; however, the discourse of nostalgic belonging spreads across Sippi villages and axiomatically divides them from narratives of exploitation embraced by Gaddi Dalits.

Sippi descriptions of Gadderan commonly invoke religious sensibilities. “From sowing the fields and cutting grass to house construction, people keep their religion when it comes to helping each other,” the auto-ethnographic account continues. “Behind this reciprocal (*pārsparik*) helping is the importance of the role of this area’s religious traditions.” It is notable how, in another context, Gaddis invoke Hinduism to naturalize their caste superiority and draw on creation mythologies that link pastoralism and sacred geography to Shiva. Halis ascribe their social exclusion from religious practices—ranging from barred access to sacred highland crossings to an inability to properly execute the *nuālā* (all-night communal sheep sacrifice)—to

ostracism by officiating Gaddi Brahmins. Sippis, however, take tremendous pride in their role as religious functionaries—as shamanistic oracles of Shiva, as *celā*-shamans whose dip in Dal Lake commences the Manimahesh pilgrimage and as ancestral kin to Trilochan Mahadev, a mythic ancestor deified by Sippis. This pride translates into an argument for Sippi tribal inclusion that, unintentional or not, undermines the struggle for the recognition of Gaddi Dalits. Moreover, by propagating the discourse of Gaddi egalitarianism Sippis may be further entrenching Rajput/Bhatt dominant interests and alienating themselves from meaningful tribal inclusion (in Welfare Boards or the Wool Federation, for example).

One aspect of Sippi misremembering may be historically anchored. Sippis are accorded higher social status than other Gaddi Dalits in both Chamba and Kangra. Newell (1952: 89) analyzed the propinquity between Gaddis and Sippis in Goshan village regarding *bartan* (gift reciprocity) and Gaddis exchanging a “traditional share” of their harvest with Sippi slate roofers. The absence of other SC Gaddis in Goshan makes it difficult to generalize status hierarchy from Newell’s single-sited fieldwork. Several decades later, Phillimore (1982: 113-149) made a series of fascinating observations about the status superiority of Sippis over Rihare in Karnathu village. Sippis roundly refused to share a hookah stem with Rihare or accept cooked food from them (Phillimore 1982: 113). Gaddis may have furtively drunk tea with Sippis, but never Rihare—“something more than a tolerated indiscretion” (Phillimore 1982: 122). Sippis were often fed at ritual feasts in the last sitting in the same row as Gaddis while Rihare were fed, if at all, around the side of the house or given food to take home. Sippis participated in village *jāgrās* (nighttime goat sacrifices) and receive *prasād* (sanctified food offering), whereas Rihare were “regarded more as village servants fulfilling a task on behalf of the community as a whole than as full participants and contributors” (Phillimore 1982:

149). Sippis benefited from the profitable business of shearing wool and making *pattu* (blankets), whereas Rihare lacked even peripheral access to flock wealth. Sippis often barred Rihare from entering their homes and conducting business and social transactions in the courtyard.

Following Parry (1979: 103, 112–113), Phillimore notes the structural similarity between Sippis and Kolis in the wider Kangra caste hierarchy. One anthropologist recently called Sippi oracles as “God’s men” and stressed their spiritual elevation among low-caste Gaddis (Pandey 2016: 50–52). My multi-sited fieldwork, from 2011 to 2017, points in the same direction: a matrix of mytho-historical and ritual roles favor Sippis, are central to their public-facing presentation, and blunt their experience of tribal casteism compared to other Gaddi Dalits—especially Halis, former plowers, and Chamars, who are the unquestionable recipients of the most naked tribal caste prejudice.⁴

Ideologies of Ethnogenesis

The legendary origin of Sippis as priestly functionaries is the *janshruti* (popular oral narrative) of the blood brothers Kaintha and Reetha. Excluding a jumbled reference (Sharma 1998: 10), the narrative has never been recorded. What follows is a translated oral account compiled with the abbreviated version included in the auto-ethnographic report:

His name is unknown, but once there was a Gaddi Rajput who had three sons. Of one son, we know nothing. We know that Kaintha was older, Reetha was younger. The father entrusted the elder Kaintha with domestic responsibilities over the cost of running the household. In addition, he began to officiate over *pūjā arcarnā* (Shiva worship). We believe that the name Sippi is a corruption of Shiva. The younger brother, Reetha, was made a shepherd, and given a flock. This reflected the father’s two *peśe* (occupations)—he

was a shepherd who officiated over Shiva rituals. He ordered Kaintha to stay at home and worship Shiva, and Reetha, who was younger and smarter, bought 400 sheep and goats and began shepherding in the mountains. While both had flocks, Kaintha followed the Gaddi tradition that the eldest should live at home and take care of his father and property. As Reetha moved about from state to state, earning money and becoming *cālak* (shrewd) in business, Kaintha remained at home taking care of the family. Reetha would send money home.

After several decades, there became a division in the house. The cause was that Kaintha began to say that he is the equal shareholder of the flock. And Reetha replied that he’s the one doing hard work, sleeping in the mountains, and Kaintha’s got everything settled. He just rings the *ghanṭī* (worship bell). The flock was not divided, but the house was. After a few generations, all the Gaddi offspring of Reetha spread throughout the mountains, even down to Punjab, and Kaintha’s *santān* (offspring) stayed only in Bharmaur. Kaintha’s offspring were called Sippi and Reetha’s offspring were called Gaddi.

The account of a brotherly dispute leading to ethnogenesis and divided castes is commonly invoked and genuinely felt by villagers. The story of Kaintha and Reetha has widespread acceptance throughout Sippi villages, to such a degree that it is treated as paramount evidence for tribal inclusion in the legislative petition. “It’s an oral tradition handed down to us from our ancestors,” a Sippi youth explained, “but it’s true.” My initial reaction was to consider such stories as figurative shorthand, but as villagers of all ages and educational cohorts faithfully repeated the narrative time and again, I had to check my own skepticism. While my scholarly inclination is to treat such oral narratives as functionally

positioning actors within frameworks of collective social aspiration—in this case, Sippi recognition as ST Gaddi shamans—I could not dismiss that what may appear to be opportunistic historical fungibility is, in everyday practice, a heartfelt axiom of caste identity and, by extension, of ethnic subjectivity.

Sippis often described how the greatest perpetrators of untouchability are not Rajputs but Gaddi Rajputs, with proximity and cultural sameness birthing new forms of resentment and distinction. This Freudian “narcissism of small differences” that leads to the exacerbation of minute distinctions in the maintenance of ethnic boundaries is best summarized in the oftquoted Sippi idiom *bhāī bhāī kā vairī hotā hai* (brothers are the natural adversaries of brothers). Pocock (1962) earlier identified how close affines and blood relatives can become intense sites of rivalry and status differentiation among agricultural castes in Gujarat.

Having said that, one additional aspect demands attention. In popular retelling, the story is further embellished to account for why Sippis received SC status. “Gaddis will wrongly tell you that we used to be *pāū* (landless tenants),” a Sippi elder explained, “and this is the cause of our *lānchan* (stigma) which made us a Scheduled Caste.” The opposing narrative is long and convoluted; it involves an illicit love affair and *nazāīs aulād* (forbidden child) between a Sippi widow and Gaddi *zamīndār* (landowner). The Gaddi refused legal ownership of the child and vengefully accused the widow of incestuous relationships with her brother. He initiated a moratorium on intercaste relations—“end hookah, end bread, end children”—which persists to the present. The Gaddi *zamīndār* curried favor from the Raja of Chamba, and Sippis were demoted in social ranking within the Gaddi community. Thus, a brotherly feud between Gaddi Rajputs suggestively links mytho-history with the current demands of state recognition.

Sippi Deification and Tribal Aspiration

“If you hear this story from a Gaddi Rajput, they will tell it to you in another way.” The legend of Trilochan Mahadev *does* sound different when retold by Sippis; most obviously, the Sippiness of the eponymous hero is placed at the center of the narrative, not often the case when retold by Gaddi Rajputs.⁵ Sippis deify Trilochan and proclaim him “their own guru.” Trilochan is not merely Shiva’s tailor; his divine selection and tragic deification establishes a hereditary link between Balode (Sippi *celās* living in Sachuin village) and Sippis throughout Himachal Pradesh. “Trilochan was a Sippi, and we are his offspring. Our son-in-law is the son of a major Baloda Sippi,” an elder prefaced before launching into the narrative. Such personal flourishes propel Sippi aspiration for tribal inclusion by highlighting their functional interdependence with Gaddis as ritual intermediaries—not abstractly, but through direct hereditary bloodlines—a discursive strategy to create propinquity with Gaddis and distance from Gaddi Dalits. I include the story in detail to emphasize its narrative emphases when recounted by Sippis.

Shankar-ji was walking toward Chaurasi in the form of a wizened shepherd he arrived at Khani and met an *buḍhiyā* (old woman). He requested salt for his flock grazing in the high pasturelands at Dhanchho. They were a poor Sippi family—what poor family had so much salt on hand? She apologetically refused his request. But Shankar advised her to go inside and check the *kanjal* (storage box), and when she did her disbelief turned into amazement. The box was brimming with a dense heap of salt! Shankar-ji requested a *man* (16 kilogram); it was poured into a *khalrū* (sheepskin pouch). The pouch was far too heavy for the weary shepherd, who requested that her son, Trilochan, act as a porter in exchange for payment. Trilochan heaved the pouch onto his back, supported by

crisscrossing ropes over his shoulders, and began to follow the old man toward the highland pastures.

Along the way, Shankar-ji created several illusions to trick Trilochan. From the outset, *taze mīnganā rai* (fresh goat feces) littered the road, giving the impression that a flock lay ahead. When they reached Dhanchho, smoldering embers and washed utensils suggested that the flock had moved further upland. However, there was no flock and Shankar-ji was enticing Trilochan toward Manimahesh Mountain. Weighed down by the pouch of salt, Trilochan asked the old man, with a trace of complaint in his voice, “How much further?” But Shankar-ji deflected his question and outpaced the boy. He disappeared around a ledge.

There are two accounts of what transpired next. Some say that Trilochan never caught up; he arrived at Dal Lake, at the base of Mount Manimahesh, and neither was the old man nor his flock anywhere in sight. Trilochan found recent footprints at the muddied edge of the water, suggesting that the old man had jumped in. Others say that Trilochan kept pace with Shankar-ji, watched him jump in, and followed him. After all, Trilochan is often described as a simple young man. Regardless of the exact sequence of events, Trilochan dove in, and sunk to the bottom, where he entered Patal Lok (Shiv Lok) and came face-to-face with a yogi, his divine visage illuminated by firelight. There could be no doubt: the old shepherd was Shankar-ji.

“Make me a *colā* (Gaddi coat),” Shankar-ji commanded, and was pleased with the result. Trilochan was employed as the personal tailor to Shankar-ji; he was given the design of a special *colā* and a place to work. He worked diligently, and as time wore

on he began missing home. His wife, what would she be thinking? After exactly six months, he expressed these concerns to Shankar-ji, who permitted him to leave. Shankar-ji hardly gave Trilochan anything for six months of labor, just a pat on the back and he returned his sheepskin pouch with leftover scraps of cloth. As he sent him off, Shankar-ji made Trilochan promise not to tell anyone about his experience. With a sad face, Trilochan set off, disappointed with his reward—a pouch of useless cloth—after giving such dedicated service to Shankar-ji.

The useless cloth weighed down Trilochan as he arduously picked his way down the steep mountain trails. Sighing with frustration, he dumped the pouch over the ledge, dismayed to find out that instead of woolen scraps drifting away chunks of gold spilled from his pouch and tumbled down the mountainside, lost. Gaddis speculate that the name of the place called Dhanchho derives from this spilling of *dhan* (wealth).

The sound of his flute wafted into his village as he advanced toward home. A *paṇḍit* (ritual expert) sat in the courtyard conducting Trilochan’s *chamahī* (six-month death ritual). He and everyone else, except his family, scattered when Trilochan arrived like a spectral ghost. His mother had gone blind with disconsolate weeping, but when he returned so did her eyesight. Trilochan was in the unkempt condition of a *siddh parūṣ* (enlightened person) with scraggly beard and tattered clothes, and stinking from head to toe.

Naturally, Trilochan’s wife demanded to know his whereabouts for six months, and Trilochan showed resolve, and refused to tell. But you know how persistent wives are in their line of questioning, and she

demanded to know everything. Trilochan knew that Shankar-ji had sworn him to secrecy, and he suspected that death was his punishment should he reveal the secret. But he bathed, changed his clothes, and told his wife everything: where he was, what he was doing, with whom. At this point there are two stories: In one account, Trilochan suddenly flew away, never to return. His corpse was found in the Budhal River in Bhaidua village. In another account, Trilochan disclosed his secret to his wife while they sat at the river's edge, and no sooner did he speak the last word of his explanation that he tumbled into the water and sank like a rock to the bottom. In any event, he died.

The Sarpanch of the village in which Trilochan died dreamed of Shankar-ji. Trilochan's death was revealed to him, and he was instructed to retrieve the corpse of Shankar-ji's devotee. He courageously tried, but to no avail.

The corpse has been worn down by the rushing water, like a stone which breaks a waterfall. In fact, the corpse had taken on the properties of stone. It had transformed into the smoothed, cylindrical shape of a *śivling* (aniconic representation of Shiva). Some Sippis believe the *śivling* remains submerged, but those living in Bhaidua village claim that the *śivling* is installed at a temple commemorating the place of Trilochan's death. Everyone agrees that the *śivling* is named Trilochan Mahadev—the devotee of Lord Shiva whose ossified body stands first in the hereditary procession of Sippi *celās*.

The discursive utility of this narrative for claiming Gaddi-equivalent social status cannot be overstated. Nowadays, Gaddi villages in Kangra are lucky to have a single Sippi tailor versed in making traditional Gaddi apparel. As a landslide of cheaper commercial options subsume Gaddi vests, hats, and blankets, the Sippi



Image: A Sippi tailor (© Stephen Christopher)

heritage as Gaddi tailors is being lost. But while Bhuttico stores selling faux-authentic Himalayan ready-mades have rendered Gaddi tailoring economically unviable, and as new social aspirations among Sippi youth have left their grandparents' spinning wheel and loom gathering dust on the verandah, the narrative of Trilochan Mahadev remains a unifying ethnic marker.

Trilochan sacralizes an otherwise quotidian profession, allowing Sippis to reimagine their subsidiary role as subordinate sheep shearers in a way unavailable to Halis struggling with the legacy of patronage exploitation. Trilochan ennobles Sippi caste-consciousness with a deified figurehead, from which many actively trace their ancestry. This is not only a source of local prestige; it buttresses the self-worth of individuals struggling to feel accepted as genuinely Gaddi. One elder, having narrated the legend of Trilochan, called his teenage son into the courtyard. "Bring your *colā*," he ordered, and the boy returned wrapped in white cloth and fumbling with the black woolen rope belt. Beaming with pride as his son stood at stern attention, he continued, "We believe that this is the style of *colā* given to Trilochan by Shivji under Dal Lake." Such psychological encouragements are hard-won among SC Gaddis (see image above).

Another important aspect of the Trilochan narrative is how it generates a cottage industry of imaginative genre spin-offs. Like the proliferation of Catholic saints—absent the cults of personality—Sippis trade stories of little purchase within the larger Gaddi community about the miraculous doings of Trilochan's offspring. These stories are barbed critiques of social hierarchy that correspond with popular village sentiment often relying on hearsay. Such stories "constitute efforts to neutralize the stigmatizing construction of their caste identity coded and perpetuated by the dominant ideology" (Parish 1996: 117).

While the Sippi-centric accounts of Trilochan broadly fit within the accepted Gaddi oral narrative, these spin-off Sippi "pasts" fall far short of the set of Gaddi

norms which "regulate the inherent debatability of the past in the present" (Appadurai 1981: 218). Although these pasts are unrecognized by most Gaddis and do not register with the Gaddi "normative organization of discourse concerning the past," they are important sites of identity formation and group aspiration whispered like weapons of the weak from the tribal margins. The most commonly retold narrative has obvious (and entirely unintended) parallels to the divine earthquake that sprung Paul and Silas from jail (Acts 16: 16–38).

You must have heard about the ruined palace in Chamba? Gaddis don't believe this story. But the Raja of Chamba who lived in that palace—I can't remember his name, maybe Singh?—he didn't believe in Trilochan Mahadev and didn't recognize his descendants. A time came when he even locked four Balode in his palace, direct descendants of Trilochanji! It is said that he locked them in a lowly *kālī koṭhrī* (black cell). From outside the cell, he mocked them: "Who would accept this low [treatment]?" That night the Balode prostrated themselves and [made] *āvāhan* [to] (pleaded to) Shiva. And suddenly there was a huge explosion and the four walls of the palace began to crack and fall apart. Even today the ruined walls are visible. The king saw that the walls were about to collapse. And he realized why. He called the four Balode, whom he had imprisoned, and he fell at their feet and begged forgiveness. He even washed their feet; at that time, the custom was prevalent. The king took the blessing of the Balode, and no further ruin came upon him. It used to be this way: Balode would sit in the road and give blessings to the people. Whenever Sippis were insulted, destruction came; whenever Sippis were respected, blessings came.

Moreover, Sippis fuse the Sippi-fied Trilochan legend with established Gaddi

lore to contrast Sippi purity with Gaddi mendacity. Gaddis frequently recount the efforts of a shepherd to crest Mount Mahimahesh. He miraculously carried 101 sheep in his *colā*, sacrificing one each step as mandated as he advanced toward the peak. Merely a few steps away from the summit, he reaches into his *colā* to discover it empty; nevertheless, he advances forward and is transformed into stone. When Sippis retell this story, Trilochan becomes the central motivation for the Gaddi effort. “The real altercation between Sippis and Gaddis began [with the] *jayjaykār* [of] Trilochanji (when Trilochanji became acclaimed),” a Sippi elder explained. “At that time, the leaders of the Gaddi caste asked: ‘If a Sippi can go into Manimahesh Mountain and receive an audience (*darśan*) with Shiv-ji, then why can’t Gaddis go as well?’ So a Gaddi set off for Shiv *darśan*, only he tried a different method.” The elder recounted the story of the sheep sacrifices, emphasizing Gaddi jealousy. “He was thinking about Trilochan-ji when he advanced those last steps without a sacrifice. ‘A Sippi had *darśan*; I will also,’ he was thinking.” After he is transformed into stone, Sippis add a second act: Parvathi appears and interrogates Shiva as to why Trilochan-ji was allowed *darśan* while the Gaddi was not. “Trilochan served me with devotion,” Shiva responds. “I know what was in his mind when he jumped into Dal Lake. And I saw what was in the mind of this Gaddi: *ahankār* (pride).”

These narrative contestations have real-life consequences. The Raihalu subcaste of Gaddis living in Kansar and other mountain villages above Bhaderwah (in Jammu and Kashmir) are considered the descendants of this avaricious Gaddi shepherd who tried to summit Manimahesh and become an equal of Trilochan Mahadev. For as long as anyone can remember, Raihalu Gaddis on the Jammu side have been prohibited from going on the Manimahesh pilgrimage. They were given a multigenerational *śrāp* (curse), whereas the Raihalu Gaddis in Himachal Pradesh have no such prohibition. Although Sippis are status-slotted below Gaddis, they take great pleasure in ribbing their

Raihalu neighbors. Trilochan took *darśan* of Shiva and his descendants are Balode oracles integral to sacred bathing at Dal Lake. Yet Raihalu cannot even attend the pilgrimage—and if they dare, they are punished. Stories circulate about how a Raihalu man was recently told by a *celā* that he could go on pilgrimage despite the curse. He came back and fell ill with *laqavā* (paralysis). Some attribute his sickness to violating Shiva’s curse; others say that he came back from pilgrimage healthy and that a member of his own caste put black magic on him because they were afraid of how his selfishness might endanger the whole community. He remains paralyzed, and no Raihalu has ever gone to Manimahesh since.

Such oral narratives about the deification of Trilochan and the miraculous lives of his descendants are integral to the construction of caste purity among Sippi ethnic entrepreneurs. These stories have proliferated among Sippis, who claim Trilochan as a deified Sippi. However, there are no accompanying anthropomorphic representations. Instead, Sippis often point to a *śivling* installed inside their homes or in nearby family shrines and describe its representation as Trilochan. “When he fell into the Budhal River and died, his body transformed into a *śivling*,” an elder explained. “I have never seen it, but it is kept alongside the river.” While the *śivling* is widely worshiped among Hindus in the region, and Gaddis are no exception, its aniconic form encourages polyvalent interpretations. For Sippis, the *śivling* symbolizes the potentiality of Lord Shiva *and* the historical personage Trilochan, the Sippi tailor whose courageous leap into Dal Lake and interim in Shiv Lok led to his deification. By particularizing an omnipresent symbol of aniconic Hinduism in the specifics of caste history, Sippis imbue the *śivling* with collective aspiration as coequals among Gaddis.

Pilgrimage and Mythic Enactments

The legend of Trilochan becomes the symbolic architecture for the annual Manimahesh pilgrimage, during which devotees venerate the sacred sites associated with his journey and perform *nhaun*

(ritual ablution) in Dal Lake (Yadav 2006: 61). Scholars have explored the vertical spatiality of Gaddi divinity and the ways in which place-making practices recursively loop mountain topography and Gaddi myth (Wagner 2013; Kaushal 2001: 38). Cosmology, ritual practice, temple architecture, traditional dress, ablution, *darśan*—a synthetic Gaddi worldview is affirmed by imbuing social meaning into sites along the Manimahesh pilgrimage. Kaushal (2001: 35) analyzes the pilgrimage as an interlocking expression of spatiality, divinity, and ecology that “validates and sanctifies the Gaddi identity and their cosmology.” I want to extend her argument to the ongoing contestation over SC tribal belonging.

How are expressions of Sippi self-worth and social aspiration interwoven with the above-described Balode, hereditary oracles whose ritual ablutions in Dal Lake lead to the commencement of the pilgrimage? How is the mythic charter of Trilochan put into practice through place-making practices? And how have Sippi identity entrepreneurs instrumentalized the Balode clan lineage as they shape their collective belonging as Gaddis through auto-ethnographic writing aimed at political reclassification? While the mutually-constituting realms of belief and spatial enactment are important sites of analysis, I want to focus on how pragmatic strategies of social legitimization and state recognition are bundled into mythic practice.

Analyzing the discordant narratives and heterogeneous caste and class-based practices embedded within Gaddi pilgrimage is apace with studies of Himalayan pilgrimage (Sax 1991; Van der Veer 1988; Miles-Watson and Miles-Watson 2011). While pilgrimage creates liminal forms of symbolic inter-relatedness that momentarily transcend hierarchical structural ties—as described in Turner’s classic formulation of *communitas*—it can also express group contestation and naturalize status hierarchies. Discrete pilgrimage groups with heterogeneous social backgrounds and incompatible expectations meet on the path to Dal Lake: urban travelers with romanticized fantasies

of communion with nature, rural travelers who undergo suffering for divine blessing, NGOs concerned with ecological preservation, plains Hindus, tribal Gaddis, and foreign backpackers. Social stratifications are marked through consumer choices, from the branded quality of hiking gear to helicoptering to Dal Lake or hiring pack-horses and porters.

In addition to these forms of social capital are the ideological stratifications that shape the meaning of pilgrimage for different actors. Numerous religious and legendary narratives are enacted through the mountain hike and sacred bathing. “The landscape caters to a variety of clients and is shaped by each of them in turn” (Miles-Watson and Miles-Watson 2011: 331). Gaddis experience pilgrimage through mythologies of cosmic affirmation. Sippis interpret the landscape through a narrower caste history that links their sense of Gaddi belonging and hereditary kinship to Trilochan. Pilgrims from across India similarly transpose Hindu beliefs onto the landscape. These may be ecological theologies mixed with Western sensibilities about mountain conservation or specific mythic emphases that shape how divinity marks the landscape. Standing on the shores of Dal Lake, Sippis reenact Trilochan’s dive into the murky waters and deification within Gaddi cosmology; others see Shiva’s ablutions after being spurned by Daksha, his father-in-law, leading to the death of his wife Sita, or the surreptitious bathing of the Pandava brothers, hidden in exile, or the gossamer abstracted lines of Sita’s *yoni* (sacred womb). “These kinds of narrativizations of the landscape create a connection between past events and present actions that direct our understanding of, and engagement with, the landscape as we reconstitute it” (Miles-Watson and Miles-Watson 2011: 323). They also form connective tissue with discursive propositions, such as the status accorded Sippis within Gaddi social organization.

How Sippis experience pilgrimage is the inner nucleus of a larger contestation over their political status as tribal

aspirants and social status as ritual functionaries. Understanding how Gaddi identity is enacted through pilgrimage means accounting for the role of Balode in Sippi sociopolitical aspiration. Outside of the tribal belt, their SC status marks them as “not-Gaddi” in popular discourse. Conversely, I want to highlight how Sippis have folded their hereditary link to Trilochan and ongoing ritual centrality into a strategy for social uplift as unrecognized tribals. Their traditional caste vocation as sheep shearers and tailors has, in contrast to other Gaddi Dalits, proven fertile discursive material for locating their group identity within the tropes Gaddi authenticity, buttressed by internal discourses and legitimized through the state criteria for tribal belonging.

Most Sippis describe a linear progression from mythic past to contemporary sociopolitical aspiration. Gaddis fled from Lahore to preserve their Hindu practice; after settling in Gadderan, a family dispute led to ethnogenesis and the subordination of Sippis. Gaddi arrogance and Sippi humility led to Trilochan’s selection as Shiva’s *cela*; his ancestral line, called Balode, continues to the present, and establishes the ongoing ritual purity and vitality of Sippis within the Gaddi tribe, as enacted through the Manimahesh pilgrimage. Reclassification of Kangra Gaddi Rajputs and Bhatt Brahmins as ST in 2002 did not extend to Sippis, despite their purchase on tribal qualities (shamanism, pastoralism, and mobility). This has led Sippis to assert their purity over Gaddi Dalits and appeal for state recognition as misrecognized Gaddi Rajputs, drawing inspiration and practical resources from their successful tribal redesignation in Jammu (Christopher 2022d). One Sippi elder succinctly summarized these points: “When Virbhadra Singh [the longrunning Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh] goes on the Manimahesh Yatra, he must touch the feet of a Balode and receive permission to bathe. How could this be possible if we are truly Dalits?”

This exceptionalism is yearly affirmed through the Manimahesh pilgrimage.

Until the Balode bathe in Dal Lake on Janamashtami, having left Sachuin village three days prior, the pilgrimage cannot commence. Their journey begins with a physical transformation from everyday Sippis to the physical embodiment of divinity. Gaddi garb has dual significations. Within the Gaddi cultural worldview, each garment is laden with symbolic reference: the white overcoat (*colā*) is spun from *patti* (woolen cloth) and is believed to be Shiva’s original garments; the *ḍorā* (coarse black rope belt) heaps around the waist like the locks of Shiva’s matted hair; and the *ṭopī* (flat cap) sits jauntily askance on the head, representing the peak of Mount Kailash and the side covering Parvathi’s inner sanctum (Kaushal 2001: 36). In a practical sense, however, Gaddi traditional attire is viewed as outmoded and largely ceremonial—worn during occasions such as weddings, festivals, and cultural performances. Although the *colā* has cognates among other Pahadi ethnic groups, it functions as a sartorial symbol of Gaddi belonging. The performative and expressive changes that the Balode undergo to become embodiments of Shiva are collectively repurposed by Sippis as evidence of inclusion.

As they descend from their village to the transfixing vibrations of the *paun* (drum), they enter the *axis mundi* of Gaddi life, the Chaurasi Temple, a microcosm of sacred geography. They journey on to Mount Manimahesh via Hadsar, Dhanchcho, Gauri Kund, and several sacred sites associated with Trilochan Mahadev. At the edge of Dal Lake, the head of a sacrificial goat is lobbed into the waters. After the Balode have finished bathing, pilgrims may enter the water. For one glorious moment, the Sippi Balode are vessels of divinity: devotees throng as they offer blessings and prognostications. Kaushal (2001: 38) describes how “[s]uch an empowerment of the low-caste *chelas* helps to suspend the social order and transcend it and return back to it, though not before having validated it through its very suspension and transcendence.” The Balode are given the goat’s head as food honor, juxtaposed with the skins, entrails,

and flesh to the butchers and devotees as *prasad* (Sharma 2009, 158).

I agree that caste transcendence is momentarily achieved through ritual performance, a short-lived achievement that in the mind of Gaddis may merely affirm caste hierarchy. Marriott (1966) describes the temporary caste-inversion of Holi in much the same manner. However, the emphasis on temporal ritual performance misses how Sippi tribal aspirations are tightly interwoven with the ritual functions of Balode. Throughout the year, dangling like as many loose threads from the Gaddi heartland to the Kangra fringes, the functions of the Balode take on additional discursive heft—to create propinquity with Gaddis (often at the expense of mocking Bhatt Brahmins, who must touch the feet of Balode) and to highlight their superior social status over Gaddi Dalit aspirants. This “highness” has shaped the self-perception of Halis—not only because Sippis refuse to join Gaddi Dalit ethnic associations but, more fundamentally, because status emulation and local caste jockeying inadvertently help to legitimate the Sippi worldview.

Status Emulation and Caste Emendation

On a sultry afternoon, when all the able-bodied men were plowing the distant fields and out of earshot, my research assistant Bihari and I met with a cross-section of Hali women in village X to understand how virilocality impacts women’s perception of caste. Many women shift into X, Pathiyar, and surrounding villages in the rural outskirts of Lower Dharamsala as newlywed Halis and, mostly with surprise, find out that their husbands are Sippis and so too will be their future offspring according to the law.⁶ This shift actively influences social presentation with neighboring Chaudhuris, Dumne, and especially Gaddis, who often consider Sippis to be more within the Gaddi fold than other SC aspirants. Although both Halis and Sippis are SCs in Himachal Pradesh, Sippis remain closest to the Gaddi touchability line due to their ancestral link to priestly functionaries. Hali women who marry into these

villages must learn to present themselves accordingly, and sometimes to file official caste corrections to bolster their new social personas with state validation.

“We Halis call ourselves as Sippis here. When we left our family homes in Holi, Chunhouta, and Lambu, we were Halis, and now we call ourselves Sippis at our inlaws” house (*sasurāl*.” The women on the verandah broke out in giggles. A nineteen-year-old woman timidly chimed in: “I just got married, so I’m still a Hali. But I need to change my caste certificate.” The other women teased her: “You’ll be a Sippi soon!” “I didn’t even know about this situation when I got married,” she shot back. “My parents must have known, but I only found out after arriving here. It’s really confusing!”

Bihari asks how this happened. “In the past, Hali elders did it for social benefit. Compared to Halis, Sippis are considered higher. They are not Gaddis; they don’t have ST status. They have SC status like us. But they are closer to Gaddis.” Although these women consider themselves as socially Hali and culturally Gaddi, they attribute the adoption of Sippi caste as a product of discrimination.

Before it was even worse. We couldn’t touch Gaddis. We couldn’t walk near them. Now we don’t share *bartan* (gift exchange) or invite each other into our homes. If they call us to a function, they sit us apart, and last. I’ve never sat on top of a Gaddi floor stove. And the condition here is better than in Chamba.

The discrepancy between official records and lived social status has led to fluid and situational identities. Sippi-converted Halis are looked down upon by Gaddi-identifying Halis across Kangra, Gaddis, “real” Sippis, and the Chaudhry castes. Gaddi-identifying Halis across Kangra feel that Sippi-converted Halis betray caste unity by hiding in the margins of caste enumeration; they consider Sippi-converted Halis to be Halis only *kāgazī taur par* (“on paper”). “Real” Sippis consider Sippi-converted Halis

inauthentic charlatans. The distinction is without a difference. Gaddis consider their Sippiness no different than Hali Aryanness, a tissue-thin euphemism for status inferiority. The Chaudhry castes lump them into a generic Gaddi tribe and elide the differences in their reservation status.

To village women, shifting caste identities matter less in terms of self-identification than unchanging clan titles (*al*). Clan lineages not only structure exogamous marriage alliances; in vernacular usage, they also connote defining features—related to occupation, physical characteristics or, most commonly, place name (usually from Bharmour, but occasionally clan titles are conferred in Kangra and refer to Bharmour). With the line between Hali and Sippi officially eroded, villagers explain how caste-specific *al* are given precedence. “Caste ... who knows (*na jāne*)? We know each other’s sub-castes: she’s Delkan, and she’s Jurgu,” a woman explained, pointing out women on the verandah. For most, these clan titles are shorthand for caste and birth village in Chamba, oftentimes used as affectionate nicknames. In contrast to the arbitrary division of Hali, Sippi, and Arya, *al* are felt by married women to express at least something unchanging, a moniker that sustains their often-nostalgic link to their villages in Gadderan.

Similarly, *gotras* are universally adopted across Gaddi castes, although they are not equally felt. The classical *gotra* system binds each grouping “by fictitious ties of descent to one or another of the *rishi* (sages) after whom the *gotra* is named. In other words, each person in a *gotra* fictitiously traces his or her descent to a single common ancestor, and two persons claiming descent from the same *gotrarishi* are forbidden from marrying each other” (Jayaraman 2005: 484). While this practice is of Brahminical origin, Rajputs and Jats across North India have adopted *gotras*, including Gaddis. In vernacular use, Gaddis as high-caste Bhattas and Rajputs are perceived to embody legitimate *gotras* while discrediting SC Gaddis who have more recently begun emulating Brahminical orthodoxy and adopting *gotras*.

For example, Badis, and Halis are often mocked for adopting the Bharadwaj *gotra*, named after Saptarishi, one of the seven patriarchs of Vedic religion.

Presumably because of their caste ranking, *gotra* identification is more automatic and heartfelt, a source of felt prestige among SC Gaddis. As Phillimore (1982: 107) noted, Sippis in and around Karnathu village “(perhaps predictably) were more interested than the two high castes in recalling their *gotra*.” I found that for SC Gaddis who struggle with mismatching social and juridical identities—Sippi and Arya-converted Halis in Himachal Pradesh, and Koli-converted Sippis in Jammu—*gotra* identification is even more pronounced. Surnames may reflect *gotra* in a way previously limited to Gaddis. Because of the slippage between Hali and Sippi, clan names—both real (*al*) and fictive (*gotra*)—take on additional resonance in grounding personal identity. Whereas Halis gently rib themselves and each other over their faux Sippiness (after all, it does not undermine their SC benefits like Arya conversion), there is an intensification around the realness of one’s *al* and *gotra*.

For many decades, emphasizing clan titles over protean caste identities was only externally challenged by Gaddis. Recently, however, groupinternal efforts are underway to instrumentally reidentify with caste. This has led to open campaigns to reclaim Halis who identify otherwise. Fifteen years ago, several prominent Hali identity entrepreneurs arrived in Pathiyar for a presentation on Hali identity. Their rally for caste unity—backed by MLA Tulsi Ram and accompanied by chants of “become Hali!” (*Hali bāno!*)—openly addressed caste hiding and described it as a form of ethnic dilution that obscured the Hali population during village enumerations and further impeded entering the tribal quota. “Rakesh [the president of the Hali Vikas Mahasangh] came from Chanhouta,” a woman remembered, “and Comrade Pratap came from Gamru, and they told us to abandon all this Sippi-Suppi.” The use of Hindi reduplicative signals a kind

of game being played around Sippi identity, trappings of reality signifying nothing.

Villagers had grown accustomed to considering their caste identity an inherited misnomer and of little functional significance. Now they were being told that their caste was a crucial marker of cultural heritage, collective memory, and demographic significance. The villagers could maintain the official charade of their Sippi-ness while interpersonally emphasizing clan identities, a strategy of Sanskritization that might, over generations, lead to higher social status within their immediate village surroundings. Doing so would deemphasize Hali unification efforts and reframe ethnicity around the high-caste ritual functions attributed to Sippis. This would be anathema to Dalit consciousness espoused by Hali ethnic associations. Alternatively, they could petition the state for caste corrections, opening their circumscribed lives to cascading frustration and financial loss as they tried to navigate government bureaucracy. Success would entail officially replacing Sippi-ness with Hali-ness and pretensions of ritual purity with overtures of Dalit oppression. Such a move would likely confirm their SC status, even though ethnic entrepreneurs believe that raising awareness about Scheduled Tribal Dalit liminality will provide the firmest legal springboard for achieving tribal status for Dalits and, in some cases, Dalit protections for tribals. They argue that strengthening Dalit consciousness among self-affirming Halis would eventually lead to social acceptance and more prestigious social benefits.

Several years have passed, and pleas for caste unity routinely fall on Sippi-named Halis. But to no avail. “We felt like if we point out our Hali caste, we would become useless (*bekār*),” a woman explained, drawing affirmations from the other women on the verandah. They appear content to base their presentational social identities on an adopted caste and real clan name—and as a result nostalgically link up with their childhood homes and blood relatives in Gadderan. Hali men are equally unmoved by pleas of caste reconversion. The logic of

Scheduled Tribe Dalit seems too quixotic, divorced from everyday practicalities, and anathema to their Sippi legal mimicry. The likelihood of successfully moving down a conveyor belt of recognition from Sippi-named Halis to Halis to Gaddi Dalits to Scheduled Tribe Dalits receiving tribal benefits seems too remote, the process too arduous and confounding. The loss of even the flimsiest form of caste prestige as official Sippis induces too much social vulnerability.

Conclusion

Meanwhile, the greater integration of Sippis into tribal life—and their constructed caste superiority over self-identifying Gaddi Dalits—often stymies a sense of shared low-caste experience; and it is conveniently manipulated by dominant Gaddi interests. I agree with Parish (1996, 207–8) that the reduplication of hierarchy posturing among Sippis (spilling into Hali emulation) both mitigates some of the psychic and social damage of impurity and turns it into a resource for self-elevation. It also exacerbates fault lines within and among grassroots mobilizations for Gaddi Dalit inclusion and, consequently, weakens their juridical appeal. At times, Sippi ethnologic prevents Gaddi Dalits from finding strength in greater numbers and carving out a pan-Himalayan juridical space for upward social mobility as Scheduled Tribal Dalits.

The state arbitration of social identities has shaped Sippi spirituality, subjectivity, and political mobilization at the most intimate scale of rural Himalayan life. Sippis are drawn further away from a shared Dalit identity with Halis and other SC Gaddis in the exploited tribal margins and closer to a fantastical vision of Bharmouri life as free of caste discrimination, where life “swings gleefully like a musical” and Sippis are treated with dignity as priestly functionaries. The propagation of myths surrounding Sippi Trilochan Mahadev, Shiva’s first oracle, and his blessed offspring further reinforces Sippi exceptionalism in a spiritual idiom—as does the Manimahesh pilgrimage, during which time the Sippi Balode have central ritual functions and Sippicentric mythologies are emplaced and

physically engaged with. While this has obvious psychological and social utility for Sippis, it stymies broader grassroots organization around the neologism of “Scheduled Tribe Dalit” and the demands to be recognized as intersectional subalterns.

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the five partially integrated SC Gaddis. Despite this, Sippis often face tribal casteism from Gaddi Rajputs and, in turn, propagate casteist attitudes towards Dalit-identifying Gaddis (Phillimore 2023).

4. Another aspect of Sippi exceptionalism not reflected in selfstylization, autoethnographies, or even collective memory—but assiduously tracked by Sharma (2009; 2015)—is the historical centrality of the Sippis in the *nuālā* performance before they were pushed out by Jogis and Bhattas and the ritual structure underwent subtle changes to reflect shifting contestatory power relations. While Sharma analyzes this as an outcome of mobile Gaddis adopting sedentary caste structures, it is worth considering how ritual power configurations further support Sippi exceptionalism and form the historical backdrop of their Dalit refusal.

5. Wagner (2013: 123-124) reflects on the Gaddi Rajputs’ tendency to claim Trilochan as their own in some accounts.

6. Dharamsala’s uniquely cosmopolitan dynamics (Christopher 2020b) may intensify the awareness of social status and demands for state-recognized tribal multiculturalism.

Endnotes

1. The exception is Middleton (2016: 163–186), which takes a phenomenological approach to changing religious practices in the context of Gorkha demands for tribal recognition in Darjeeling.
2. Recent media coverage of Gaddi Dalit organizations include <https://www.jagran.com/lite/himachal-pradesh/kangra-gaddi-dhogri-and-lohar-union-meeting-16924780.html> and <https://www.divyahimachal.com/2021/11/gaddi-words-to-be-added-to-sub-castes/>. Most events receive no media attention.
3. While Sharma (2009: 122) describes Sippis as serving “in subsidiary capacity to the Gaddis, and [...] placed very low in the caste hierarchy,” it is clear that Sippis both selfstylize and are treated by Gaddis as the unquestionably *highest* status group among

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