

Special Issue Research Article

## Exploring Gaddi Pluralities: An Introduction and Overview

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### Abstract

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This Introduction provides the first exhaustive overview of the range of ethnographic and historical research on Gaddis. Beginning with late 19th-century colonial efforts to pin down, in a manner characteristic of the period, the elusive structure of Gaddi society, we trace the trajectory of research in numerous Gaddi communities in western Himachal Pradesh over the last seventy years. We highlight several areas of substantial research at the intersection of politics, religion, gender and economy, and how these shape contemporary disputes about cultural identity. These disputes can be best summarized as the question: ‘Who counts as a Gaddi?’ Of course, the historic identity of Gaddis as the preeminent sheep and goat herding pastoralists of the region looms large, even as transhumant pastoralism itself declines, for herein lies the ideological roots of contemporary social divisions and exclusion. We also highlight how the diversity of ethnographic vantage points brought together in this Special Issue help to dispel lingering assumptions of Gaddi cultural and political uniformity across the region, as each in different ways illuminates the connections between Gaddis, their neighbors, and the state.

### Keywords

Ethnicity; Scheduled Tribe; social change; pastoralism; spirituality

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## Introduction

The Indian part of the Himalaya has not generally received the extent of ethnographic scrutiny that is apparent from the literature on Nepal. However, that seems to be changing, and a case in point would be the attention given to the Gaddis of western Himachal Pradesh, on whom a burgeoning ethnographic and historical literature now exists. This special issue of HIMALAYA offers insight into some of this work. In this Introduction, we place the articles published here in the context of wider work on Gaddis and consider the connections to broader debates in India today, on the one hand, and within Himalayan studies, on the other.

There are two goals for this Introduction. The first is to provide a thematic overview of research on Gaddis, which can help social scientists navigate the scholarly landscape—the first time this has been done, and perhaps the first time there has been a need, given the range of this growing literature. This overview stems from a workshop that brought together (also a first) six anthropologists who have worked in Gaddi communities.<sup>1</sup> Folded into this overview are suggestions for future investigations into under-researched or emerging areas of interest. The second and shorter part, though no less important, is to consider certain ethical and methodological aspects of Gaddi research, specifically, how to foster polyvocal ethnography and indigenous scholarship to encourage more diverse academic representations—especially important considering some of the arenas of contestation we explore below. As is reflected in this special issue, there is as yet a regrettable paucity of research on Gaddis by Gaddis.

Our purpose is not to reify Gaddis as a primordial tribal group but to challenge such deeply embedded assumptions, using to advantage the range of Gaddi communities in which we have worked. All the articles reflect how “Gaddiness” is a processual identity constructed through historical discourses and forms of state recognition and affirmed through engagement with

neighboring communities, including *pahārīs*, Muslims, and Tibetans. We question the stability implied in a label of ethnicity and identity such as Gaddi, highlighting the varied forms of contestation surrounding claims to Gaddi identity and showing how different meanings attach to the name Gaddi when it is viewed through different prisms. In short, we address the animating question of the extent to which it is possible to identify a single Gaddi identity. As our collective work demonstrates, both ideological visions of Gaddi belonging and geographical borders of Gaddi life are more expansive than was acknowledged in previous generations. And while the details may be specific to areas where Gaddis predominate, the resonances will have echoes in many parts of South Asia. Our contention is that core ideas around “Gaddiness” remain important—indeed, there are contexts in which the identity of being “Gaddi” is becoming more significant. However, it is equally crucial to emphasize the fractured and fluid nature of Gaddi subjectivities, which rarely cohere around the idea of “being Gaddi”—or do so only fleetingly in certain contexts: a Gaddi identity can be shed as well as sought.

Gaddis live primarily in two districts of Himachal Pradesh: Chamba and Kangra. In total, they number around 200,000 today. A smaller population of around 30,000 lives in Bhaderwah district, adjoining Chamba in the southern part of Jammu & Kashmir. Until the mid-19th century, most Gaddis lived in Chamba, primarily in one part, Bharmour. Gaddis knew this area as Gadderan, their “homeland” under the Chamba Raja. Their relationship with the Chamba Raja was a cornerstone of their historically distinctive identity. Kangra was until then a place of winter migration only, when the pastoralist Gaddis would drive their flocks of sheep and goats south, out of the high mountains, and over the Dhaula Dhar to the more temperate lower hills until the following summer. However, with the British annexation of Punjab, in 1849, many Gaddis gradually started to settle in Kangra, drawn by a new market in land that did not exist in Chamba because, while Kangra

came under direct rule, Chamba remained a princely state till 1947. Gaddis tended to establish their hamlets and villages on the southern slopes of the Dhauladhar, on land regarded by the wider Kangra population as inferior, consolidating a degree of separation from the rest of the Kangra population which lasted until the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For the shepherding Gaddis, such locations had positive advantages, notably the access to sizeable tracts for grazing in the forests and pastures typically too high for agriculture. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kangra was well established as a district with a sizeable permanent Gaddi population, while in Chamba, Gaddis had also spread in numbers away from Bharmour down the Ravi River towards the town of Chamba itself – and even beyond to Bhaderwah.

A century ago, Gaddis were far from being the only migratory shepherds of the region. However, one legacy of the colonial period was to consolidate Gaddis as the preeminent sheep and goat pastoralists of what was at that time known as the Punjab Himalaya, just as the Gujjars gained similar recognition as the buffalo-herders of the region. Imperial classificatory efforts fixed Gaddis as primarily pastoralists; their counterparts to the east in Kullu, for example, were arbitrarily considered by the government to be primarily agriculturalists, despite their transhumant shepherding at the time. In consequence, Gaddi identity as transhumant pastoralists received a degree of state recognition a century and more ago, and this pastoralist identity has been an enduring feature of the years before and since Independence, in a way that has no counterpart elsewhere in the modern state of Himachal Pradesh.<sup>2</sup> Yet while the image of Gaddis as pastoralists persists to the present, in practice fewer and fewer Gaddis hold flocks. What was a ubiquitous part of Gaddi life even forty or fifty years ago is now much less common, largely concentrated in a handful of villages (and even here, the trend is in one direction). That said, it would be premature to say that transhumant shepherding has yet become a thing of the past: we will have more to

say on this subject later. Gaddis are hardly unique in this respect. Around the world, pastoralism as an economy and way of life has been declining for decades, even though a cultural association with pastoralism may remain. What several of the papers in this issue will highlight is both the residual power of that historical pastoralist identity and a residual stigma associated with it. As our papers show, that ambiguity has had tangible consequences as Gaddis shape their relation to the modern state and the cultural politics of caste.

It is important to recognize that the transhumant lifestyle of the past was not only about shepherding but also embraced agriculture. Indeed, as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the appeal of moving to Kangra from Chamba was that it facilitated new options for herding and cultivation, as for the first time, it became possible to purchase land (Kapila 2022). Rarely was the agricultural land irrigated, but even unirrigated land on steep slopes expanded household options and offered some insurance against the risks inherent in holding livestock (Phillimore 1982). The common epithet of “agro-pastoralist”, often used of Gaddis, reflects the centrality of that combination, and bigger flocks rarely indicated a long-term bias towards shepherding, so much as a means of capital accumulation to reinvest in expanding cultivated land ownership to consolidate family wealth.

Today, less visible than the decline of pastoralism is a gradual move in Gaddi villages away from agriculture. This is most evident close to the bigger towns, especially around Dharamsala (Axelby, this issue; Christopher 2020; Kapila 2004, 2022; Simpson 2022; Wagner 2013). If the rigors of shepherding have become less and less appealing for successive generations of young Gaddi men, in turn agriculture and the idea of working on the land has also become less attractive in the last decade or two for those of both sexes who can see new opportunities for urban work made possible by their education (and never available to their parents). But even where urban work is not a realistic possibility, the same trend is apparent

in more remote villages, as families reduce the number of plots they cultivate (see Bulgheroni's article, this issue).

Before going on to the themes and questions our papers take up, we need to examine the name "Gaddi" itself, at least in a preliminary fashion. The question of who counts as a Gaddi highlights one of the major fault lines in internal Gaddi politics, taken up in several papers here. Questions about tribe and caste are at the heart of these arguments. Gaddi pastoralism—in essence, their transhumance, construed as a quasi-nomadic and therefore non-settled lifestyle—has been the key criterion for their state classification as a Scheduled Tribe (ST). Yet not all Gaddis are recognized as having ST status. Administrative geography has meant that Kangra has a significantly different history to Chamba in this regard, and in Jammu, the story is different again. Moreover, those excluded from ST recognition include all the so-called low-caste Gaddis (except in Jammu). This begs the question: do these low-caste Gaddis count as Gaddis at all? Is Gaddi a caste name (for a relatively high caste) or an inclusive tribal name encompassing several castes? In the latter case, the "Gaddi" ethnonym bespeaks a tribal community (*samudāy*) of unequally stratified caste groups—sedentary and pastoral—loosely unified by the Herderian notion of shared dialect, culture, and attachment to a homeland. Tribal and caste identities are commonly assumed to preclude each other, and tribal ethnicity ostensibly stands outside of caste, making the idea of caste within tribes almost a contradiction in terms. Yet, as elsewhere in India, tribe and caste have, in reality, long interpenetrated one another, making the Gaddi experience a valuable prism through which to explore this duality. Moreover, while there is some debate as to whether Gaddi internal divisions should be counted as caste divisions (see below, and as will be explored in some of the papers), a widely held starting point is that Gaddis comprise a tribe made up of several castes. However, as the question of who counts as Gaddi alerts us, this simple formulation that Gaddis are a tribe of several castes is not

straightforward. We will begin to unpick this preliminary understanding shortly as we now move to summarize the historical trajectory of ethnographic research on different Gaddi communities over the post-independence era.

Our guiding argument is that Gaddis are considerably more complex and diverse than early postcolonial research suggested. Indeed, the colonial Gazetteer logic of who Gaddis are, where they live, and what work they do still marks both scholarship and political advocacy, with paradoxical results and inevitable misrecognitions. We explore such claims here and in several of the articles following. As well as critical scrutiny of Gaddis' internal fault lines, we also touch on external relationships (addressed more fully elsewhere), notably, a complex and far from uniform history of Gaddi sociality with Muslim Gujjars, and, more recently, a relationship with Tibetans, resident as refugees in Kangra since the early 1960s. In both these cases, fruitful relationships of amity have been crosscut by times of tension and difficulty, in which localized inequalities in wealth and political leverage have been important (see particularly Axelby 2016; Christopher 2020b, 2022d).

These questions of cultural identity are equally questions of political self-presentation and performance, and we return below to consider the sphere of formal party politics (see Axelby (this issue) for a detailed analysis of the ebb and flow of Gaddi political alignments at elections in one locality). We also explore the impact of gendered inequalities and widening socioeconomic stratification, more pronounced in some Gaddi areas than others. And we raise the impacts of climate change on Gaddi transhumance and their broader seasonal patterns of mobility and migration.

### **Identity: The Legacy of Colonial Classification and the Impact of Reservation Politics**

From the oldest colonial records through the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century census reports and into the present, there has been a robust debate about who counts as Gaddi.

Alternative definitions are apparent in early British administrative reports in a quest to pin down the elusive structure of the group for colonial taxation and easier surveillance. The definitions asserted in these reports continue to echo into the present. The earliest of these writers, Barnes (1862: 90), considered Gaddis as a generic title for Khatri, Rajputs, Rathis, and Brahmins—and unequivocally excluded lower castes. Both Lyall and Rose shifted away from Barnes’ exclusivist definition to a more open-ended distinction. Lyall (1874: 87) considered Gaddis a “distinct nationality” composed of two classes: “first-class” Gaddis are high castes who practice commensal distancing with “second-class” Gaddis, those considered “their lower castes.” Rose (1911: 256) expanded this classification into four classes: Brahmins; Khatri and Rajputs (who wear *janeū*); Thakurs and Rathis (who do not); and a “menial or dependent class” that are “wrongly” included as Gaddis by outsiders but “correctly” excluded by Gaddis. Viewed in hindsight, the movement is towards more polysemous classifications that try to balance colonial investments in tribal egalitarianism, emic exclusions proffered by Gaddi Rajputs and Brahmans, and early quasi-ethnographic data across different locations. Yet these increasingly confident pronouncements, evident in successive colonial renditions, simply reframed the original uncertainty: who “really” counted as Gaddi?

Until recently, post-colonial scholarship—anthropological and historical—has tacitly accepted and restated these earlier accounts; that is, maintaining an exclusionary definition of the Gaddi tribe as Rajput (and arguably Brahmin). This is evident in the works of historians Chetan Singh (1997) and Mahesh Sharma (2013), who both argue that Gaddi tribal boundaries are closed and that the pragmatic development of internal differentiation can be largely explained as a byproduct of growing interdependence between Gaddis and caste-oriented agriculturalists in Kangra or lower parts of Chamba. Among anthropologists, Phillimore (1982: 14–20), echoing Newell a generation earlier, also

concluded that the name Gaddi did not extend to their associated lower castes. He described how low-caste groups “although obviously associated with the Gaddis, ... have almost certainly never been Gaddis as such other than in the mistaken usage of outsiders.” Yet he went on to enumerate the commonalities linking Gaddis and partially integrated low-caste groups. Phillimore’s article for this special issue tracks how his own thinking has evolved as he has come to question earlier assumptions. This shift comes in response to a more critical interrogation of Gaddi identity in the ethnographic literature, recognizing its inherently contested character. It is this recent turn in Gaddi ethnography that we now summarize.

The starting point of this critical interrogation was Kriti Kapila’s (2008) analysis of diverging Gaddi and Bhatt Brahman responses in Kangra to new opportunities for a reclassification of status in the years immediately after the 1990 implementation of the Mandal Commission Report.<sup>3</sup> This culminated in Kangra’s high-caste Gaddis receiving ST status in 2002, after decades of campaigning to bring themselves into line with their Chamba peers. But, as Kapila shows, this was not before Bhatt Brahmans had initially opted for a different strategy to become reclassified as OBC. On the one hand, was Brahman skepticism about the status implications of pursuing “tribal” status in modern India; on the other was Rajput astonishment that Brahmans should consciously opt for recognition as OBCs. The consequence, at least in the short-term, was a widening gulf between Gaddis and Bhatt Brahmans, where formerly distinctions were minimal. Kapila (2008) analyzed how state ethnography informed administrative judgments of the defining characteristics of tribes; her work on how the state adjudicates difference as the basis for Gaddi redistributive justice has been foundational to later research on Gaddi politics of recognition (see also Kapila 2022).

While Marc Galanter’s (1984) formative analysis of Indian reservations first drew anthropologists’ attention to the importance

of this political arena, it was the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations after 1990 that was the critical turning point, leading to a surge of academic interest in the social field of affirmative action policies (Shah and Shneiderman 2013). Much of this literature has focused on the leverage opened by Mandal for lower castes or marginalized communities. Where Kapila (2008) examined the divergent strategies within the Gaddi elite in Kangra, subsequent Gaddi research has highlighted the perspectives of the lower castes. Stephen Christopher (2020a, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) and Nikita Simpson (2021, 2022) have, for the first time, examined what Gaddi identity means to the lower castes: Sippi, Hali, Rehara, and Badi. Of a piece with accounts from elsewhere in India, ethnographic and autobiographical (Rawat & Satyanarayana 2016; Gidla 2018), their studies highlight just how much low caste perspectives have been marginalized in previous Gaddi ethnographies, where they tend to be presented as mere adjuncts to an authoritative upper caste worldview. In the pages of this recent work, Sippis and Halis, the two most numerous of the lower castes, proclaim themselves as Gaddis while simultaneously confronting the resistance that denies and dismisses their claim.

Christopher has written in detail about the dilemmas and choices of different Gaddi low castes: for some, pursuing recognition and assimilation as Gaddis; for others, abandoning any such aspirations. In one such case, Halis converted to Arya Samaj to combat tribal casteism but found themselves stuck in an administrative limbo (2022a). In another case, a number of Halis opted for charismatic Protestantism as a means to resist occult targeting and fuse spirituality with social aspirations (2022b, 2022c). Like Kapila (2008), Christopher examines the tortuous negotiations with the state entailed in seeking official recognition of a new status and shows how the ethnologies underpinning state re-recognition enforced anachronistic performances of tribality (Christopher 2020a). In the most self-consciously political challenge to the status quo, a campaign for recognition as

“Scheduled Tribe Dalits” (STD) has emerged recently—a double challenge, in the sense that it counters received ideas that tribal groups in India are axiomatically egalitarian, while also asserting that STD can be a Gaddi identity (Christopher 2020). Most recently, Nikita Simpson (2021, 2022) included Scheduled Caste groups, especially Halis, in her analysis of gendered idioms of tension and distress among Gaddi women, respecting the self-evaluation of her Hali friends and acquaintances that as Halis they were Gaddis, whatever their high caste counterparts might say.

In all these contexts, we see the pull between conflicting understandings of identity—the one proclaiming itself as primordial, perpetuating an exclusionary status quo first reified in British colonial classifications, the other self-consciously assertive, assisting pragmatic or radical status redefinition in an era of post-Mandal opportunity and revitalized Dalit politics.<sup>4</sup> Future scholarship will surely continue to interrogate how Gaddi ethnic boundaries get challenged or redefined, how the recursive looping between emic identity and Scheduled Tribe quotas plays out, and the continuing battles over Dalit recognition within a wider Gaddi tribal identity. More broadly, there is a need to contextualize Gaddi reservation politics within wider Indian developments, especially regarding contested Dalits within tribal formations, not least to better theorize how claims for redistributive justice and equity are politically instrumentalized.

### **Religion and Spiritual Responses to Distress and Exclusion**

Scholars of Gaddi religious practice have brought to the fore the mutual embeddedness of Gaddi religion with their pastoralism as a vocation and the Dhauladhar/Pir Panjal Mountains as the ecological setting. Gaddi spirituality has been inextricable from emplaced cosmologies in the mountains, enactments of the significance of place through ritual, and the linking of pastoralism, Shiva worship, and clan-based tribal affiliation. The name Shivbhumi (the land of Shiva), a sacralized epithet for Gadderan,

makes the intimate association between Shiva and the boundaries of Gaddis' traditional land apparent.

Two distinct but complementary avenues of research on Gaddi religion have emerged. The first focuses on the ritual, spatial, and phenomenological practices of making place, enacting their bond with nature, and affirming Gaddi tribal identity. Molly Kaushal (1998; 2001) analyzed how Gaddi myth synchronizes with mountain topography and experiences of verticality. Pilgrimage emerges as an interlocking expression of spatiality, divinity, and ecology that “validates and sanctifies the Gaddi identity and their cosmology” (Kaushal 2001, 35)—a theme similarly explored by Jonathan and Sukanya Miles-Watson (2011). Anja Wagner (2013) considered pilgrimage within a broader matrix of mountain mobilities and spiritual enactments through which places are constructed and apprehended. Wagner also analyzed the all-night sheep sacrifice (*nuālā*) that symbolically links Gaddis to Shiva and the sacredness of particular places. Building on William Sax, she persuasively argued that ritual performance not only affirms kin ties but also, crucially, constructs the boundaries of Gaddi self-identity (especially vis-à-vis neighbors).

The second avenue focuses on how religion has become a terrain for assertions of status, with intra-Gaddi status competition and exclusionary expressions of belonging. Mahesh Sharma (2015) looked back on his first experience of the *nauala* (his usage) in 1990 to track how Sippis, once so central as *chela*, were being replaced by Jogis and Bhatt Brahmans in a Sanskritizing process led by Gaddis living in Kangra. As this has happened, the ritual itself has changed to reflect the shift in agency away from Sippis. Christopher (2018) analyzed how the *nuālā* he witnessed not only affirmed Gaddiness, as professed by participants but, less ostentatiously, also excluded Gaddi Dalits. Instead, the latter perform their own counterpart rituals with their own ritual officiants. And in a pointed allusion to the high caste rite from which they are

excluded, vegetarian offerings provide a kind of Sanskritizing one-upmanship by the Gaddi low castes relative to their high caste peers whose *nuālā* retain animal offerings.

More profound in its implications, Christopher's work on Gaddi Dalit spirituality has tracked how tribal casteism and suspicion of malign Gaddi spirits have in recent years shaped Hali conversion in a minority of cases to anti-caste forms of religious identity like the Arya Samaj (2022a) and Protestant Christianity (2022c).<sup>5</sup> His argument here is that the demands for ST recognition by Gaddi Dalits are not confined to the political sphere, but also shape spirituality, hermeneutics, and ritual. Embracing Arya Samaj or charismatic Protestant affiliations is the outward expression of these inward struggles in ways that also anticipate the discussion below. All this is to take us a long way from the seemingly primordial expressions of religious identity outlined in the previous paragraph. It attests to the degree of religious ferment below the surface, especially among Dalits, and is a reminder that Gaddi religion is continuously undergoing change that will require future research.

Picking up on how spirituality may index forms of distress, there is mounting evidence from Gaddi studies, whether we look through the lens of caste, class, or, in generational terms, through age cohorts. Alongside Christopher's analyses of the context in which some Halis have felt drawn to forms of religious belonging that would have been unimaginable even a generation ago, it is helpful to consider the resilience of older cultural idioms of distress within Gaddi communities. These might be framed as questions about the “modernity of witchcraft,” borrowing the phrase from an extensive African literature initiated by Peter Geschiere (1997), in which a central claim is that salient characteristics of modernity may actually foster and fuel the unease and suspicion on which witchcraft beliefs can flourish. “Witchcraft” or “magic” can, of course, be problematic terms to deploy. However, in our context, we are dealing with two local conceptions

in particular – *jadu* and *opara*, where the former is commonly classed as witchcraft, the latter as literally “seizure,” but more commonly magic. Both index malign and intentionally inflicted harm caused by an ill-disposed human agent. That said, there is a certain degree of slippage between the two idioms in local usage, and one person’s suspected *jadu* could easily be another’s suspected *opara*. And since both surface as suspicions, rarely if ever as accusations, any possible (intensely private) confirmation of where the likely source might be comes through consultation with a ritual diagnostician. This is typically the *cela*. Daniel Côté (2007) usefully categorized Gaddi *celes* as either spirit mediums, endowed with social prestige and found among all status groups, or exorcists and healers, the exclusive domain of Halis (much like Chamars in the wider Kangra world). The former participate in public ceremonies, the latter in private ones, often concealed from others. Christopher (this issue) analyses how Sippi public mediumship has driven their political exceptionalism as a caste, determined to distance themselves from those they consider inferior in status—Halis, Reharas, and Badis. Their historical recognition by the Chamba Raja crucially emphasized their special position. But Halis are not only exorcists and healers; as Christopher has shown, they also believe themselves to be regular victims of *jadu* and *opara*. And he goes on to suggest a direct link between affliction and exorcism, on the one hand, with the turn towards Christianity (Christopher 2022b, 2022c). For, while Halis may escape from spiritual afflictions by turning to vernacular Protestantism as a community from which exorcists are drawn, they are also attracted to the way that this form of Christianity reinvests pejorative exorcism practices with a positive meaning.

Nikita Simpson (2021; in press; this issue) also analyses the resilience of *jadu* and *opara* suspicions in her explorations of gendered idioms of distress. While suspected “attack” may afflict a Gaddi of any caste or class—and Simpson gives the first account of how salient class inequalities are in this context in the Dharamsala

area where she worked—or be attributed to a Gaddi of any background, her account suggests that the low castes and those with least social capital are disproportionately vulnerable: vulnerable especially as imagined victims, but also as imagined perpetrators. In that sense, her work (2022; in press) also brings the power of stigma into the discussion by weaving together the potent impact of vulnerability, marginalization, and otherness in women’s attempts to make sense of distress in their lives – and the profound sense of stigma they often experience.

The paragraphs above emphasize the interlocking of different spiritual idioms for addressing distress and the enduring power of *jadu* and *opara* as explanations amenable to ritual amelioration, as much today as in the past. However, Phillimore (2014), working in a village renowned locally as a center for *jadu*, had a different emphasis. He suggested that, over the course of thirty years and more, *jadu* in this particular village was becoming steadily less pervasive and less convincing as an explanatory idiom. In contrast to Geschiere and others, he argued that *jadu* was declining there because it had “unmodern” connotations in a place catching up on new educational and employment opportunities. His argument was not that *jadu* had totally disappeared from village discourse but that the village had lost its former reputation as a hotbed of *dains* (witches) and no longer stood out as infamous. After a long history of being regarded as distinctly “other,” it had become much like other Gaddi villages in Kangra.

All the writers cited in this section have written from different starting points. Taken together, they offer a sense of Gaddi spirituality as a source of identity (but for whom?) and solace (likewise, for whom most of all?). We also hope to have shown what a time of flux this is, with even the most enduring rituals like *nuālā* being constantly reimaged (as Sharma and Christopher have shown) and new religious-spiritual trajectories opening up, especially for Gaddi Dalits.



Nothing here is fixed, and therein lies an immense scope for future research.

### From Kinship and Marriage to Gender Politics

In the first decades of anthropological research after independence, the study of Gaddi marriage arrangements revolved around caste isogamy and its relationship to the hypergamy of the wider region in Chamba and Kangra. Newell (1955, 1967) and Phillimore (1982) explored these dynamics in detail. The former noted traces of a once-hierarchical structure within the Gaddi caste in Bharmour; the latter observed a thoroughly egalitarian pattern of marriage arrangements a generation later in eastern Kangra. Similar kinds of research were taking place at the same time in neighboring Himalayan areas (e.g., Churah, in northern Chamba, Brar 1971). The defining work of the period was Parry's study of kinship and marriage among Kangra's high castes (1979). Although it was not concerned with Gaddi kinship, it offered the most detailed analysis of the dynamics of hypergamous marriage in the area's dominant culture and, by extension, portrayed the cultural climate from which the egalitarian arrangements of groups like Gaddis stood apart. This contrast carried significant status implications for, in Kangra, equality between the two sides of a marriage lacked the status accorded to unions where the bride married "up." Thus, Gaddi isogamy (and the emphatic valuation of an equal relationship between affines) was inherently inferior in status to the wider valuation of the more hierarchical marriage culture of Kangra's elite.

All this work now has a distinctly historical feel. Not only have anthropological interests in kinship undergone a transformation, led by feminist reframing of the field, but the values and expectations of the past have been replaced by newer aspirations and pressures, reshaping Gaddi practices (as well as others'). Kapila's account (2003, 2004) of Gaddi marriage at the turn of the present century reflects both shifts mentioned above. She shows how new expectations of the relationship between

wife and husband must now work alongside older notions that marriage linked families and lineages. Assumptions about marriage as an investment in a personal partnership, with decidedly new expectations concerning intimacy, coincided with a growing number of Gaddis of both sexes continuing education past school to college and university. Against this background of Gaddis educated to degree level, descriptions of embedded patterns of hypergamy or isogamy were increasingly beside the point. Arguing against the proposition that modernity necessarily uncoupled sex and love from marriage, in Kapila's view Gaddi conjugal practices suggested precisely the opposite, highlighting a prevailing west-centric bias in the theorization of sex and marriage. For her, the Gaddi example highlighted how marriage was in the process of being newly affirmed as the only legitimate place for sexual intimacy (Kapila 2004). But as economic openings also grow through opportunities for educated women in the urban labor markets of the area, Kapila draws attention to a parallel closing, with stricter normative expectations of female propriety. For Kapila, such developments in Gaddi kinship and marriage are more than responses to and reflections of wider currents of modernity. They are also rooted in the specific interventions of colonial governance in the "codification of the customary" (2003: 86), which continued into the post-colonial era. As she puts it, "Heirship was the idiom used by the state to codify kin relations" (2003: 139), for it was through the legal definition of property rights that the modern idea of the Gaddi household was shaped. Kapila's recent book *Nullius* (2022), develops these ideas further, foregrounding how Gaddi women navigate the world of property and inheritance and the legal complexities they must manage.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the subsequent work by feminist scholars has focused on women's agency in various contexts. Kaushal (2021) has recently explored how Gaddi women have negotiated their own empowerment within patrilineal, patriarchal social structures—and she tracks the Gaddi "feminine principle" in myth, ritual, and sociality. Both

Wagner (2013) and Kapila (2022) have highlighted Gaddi place-making practices not in terms of the preeminence of pastoralism (an intrinsically male-dominated world) but instead highlighting the role of women's agency in making place: in pilgrimage, daily ritual, and kinship routines. Wagner (2012), echoing themes developed by Kirin Narayan's work on women's oral traditions in the Kangra valley (1995, 1997), argued that Gaddi women's ironic joking during marriage events is both a gendered critique and constitutive of an independent everyday morality. Often licentious or scurrilous, these social forms may be at the heart of women's enjoyment of taking down male presumptions. However, the same expectations of female propriety that Kapila documented are also found in this context as, in urban areas at least, such singing is now increasingly frowned upon.

Simpson (2021, 2022, in press), harking back to the discussion in the previous section, has recently examined the gendered character of tension and distress and its somatic effects. She highlights the different dimensions and dynamics of such stress/distress (caste, class, generation, in particular) in women's lives, locating her analysis within the frame of a largely post-pastoral Gaddi world around Dharamsala. For example, Simpson takes the emotionally loaded term *kamzori* (which she classes as a kind of gendered bodily weakness) as a window into older women's distress and its manifestation in the body (2022). Restating the relevance of the concept of alienation in such a context, she teases out inter-generational tensions at the heart of the experience of *kamzori*—between older women, who have labored in the house and fields, and now expect care in old age, and younger women, who have to resolve their own conflicts between class aspiration and familial obligations—to convey an unconsoling picture of unreciprocated sentiment. In her most recent article (Simpson, in press), she brings class to the fore, exploring the anxieties (*ghar ki tension*) surrounding what is often experienced by women as a precarious foothold in India's growing middle class.

## Pastoralism

All ethnographers working with the Gaddi community have acknowledged the historical importance of their pastoralism. Even today, with the pastoral economy and way of life widely considered—by Gaddis and outsiders alike—to be in decline, ethnographers continue to stress its centrality to Gaddi identity.<sup>7</sup> The tension between past practice and present identity is encapsulated in the contrast between the title of Anja Wagner's book, *The Gaddi beyond Pastoralism* (2013), and the introduction to the latest book featuring Gaddi ethnography, Kriti Kapila's *Nullius*, where she states near the start, "The Kangra Gaddis, among whom I have conducted my research since 1999, are a pastoralist community" (2022: 3). But not all ethnographers have made the transhumant cycle and the practices of pastoralism a focus of their work. Among those who have, Phillimore (1982), Bhasin (1988), Wagner (2013), and above all, Saberwal (1999) have each documented aspects of the pastoral cycle, with Saberwal's study notable for the most detailed exploration of relations between shepherds and the key regulatory institution, the Forest Department. Among historians, Minoti Chakravarty-Kaul (1997, 1998) and Richard Tucker (1986) have, like Saberwal, had a particular interest in the regulatory regimes for graziers established in the colonial period and how these, in turn, modified a patchwork of prior customary rights to pasture access under the Chamba Raja and in Kangra. The most vivid account of the annual migration has come from outside academic writing, in Christina Noble's popular *Over the High Passes* (1987), based on her accompanying a flock north from Kangra to Lahaul and back in the 1980s.

Among ethnographers currently writing, Richard Axelby, Maura Bulgheroni, and Aayushi Malhotra and her colleagues have an ongoing interest in the present state of Gaddi pastoralism. Axelby (2007) echoes and updates Noble in his first-hand account of the phases of the annual migratory cycle, focusing especially on

negotiations around pasture access. More than any other anthropologist, Axelby has looked at the relationship between Gaddis and Gujjars, the Muslim buffalo herders whose routes intersect with those of Gaddi herders, analyzing the shifting dynamics of tolerance, cooperation, tension, and dispute in Chamba (2016, also 2020). Axelby and Bulgheroni (2021) are also the first ethnographers to directly consider the impact of climate change on Gaddi pastoral routines, based on their separate case studies from higher- and lower-altitude parts of Chamba. They highlight, among other things, how rising temperatures have affected the quality of grassland and, consequently, the animals' health; how dry monsoons or unseasonal storms have left soils drier or covered in mud; how risks are heightened during migration, owing to the melting of glaciers and storms leading to increasing landslides; how shepherds have sought to increase the percentage of goats in their herd since, compared to sheep, they can better avoid noxious plants; and the increase in small movements in winter grazing areas to compensate for the scant availability of vegetation (2021: 10).<sup>8</sup> Bulgheroni takes up some of these points in her article in this issue, where she sets climate change pressures alongside wider social and economic transformations in a locality close to Bharmour in the heart of Gadderan.

Axelby and Bulgheroni also argue—against the grain of much commentary on the viability of pastoralism—that shepherding in the Bharmour area (where Bulgheroni worked) is proving “surprisingly tenacious.” They continue: “Though the environmental niches in which pastoralism operates are undergoing dramatic alterations...the keeping of sheep and goats has transformed into an investment opportunity” (2021: 10), with expanding urban markets for meat a critical factor in sustaining its viability. Interestingly, Malhotra et al. (2022) echo this emphasis on the resilience of Gaddi pastoralism. Crucial to their assessment is the importance of hired hands—*puhal*—in sustaining the Gaddis' shepherding economy today. Based on a study in

Bharmour, they note the expanding use of *puhal* and provide the first examination of the hiring process itself. Gaddi shepherds have long used *puhal* on a small scale or to help with temporary labor shortages; what is new is the greater reliance of flock owners on *puhal* (often hired from outside local webs of kin and increasingly from non-Gaddi and non-shepherding backgrounds—including from outside of Himachal Pradesh) as a means to sustain an ancestral investment in the pastoral economy through non-family labor.<sup>9</sup> The authors suggest, moreover, that the benefits are not only one-way because the system enables individuals to gain a foothold as herders themselves (2022: 10). Thus, like Axelby and Bulgheroni, Malhotra et al. suggest that Gaddi pastoralism is not (yet) on its last legs, as it “seems to be effectively reinventing itself” (2022: 12).

The two preceding paragraphs point to a rich vein of research questions in the coming years. Climate change, in particular, is emphatically shaping pastoralism's future, with impacts on the pastoral cycle and economy that are still becoming apparent, as Bulgheroni's article in this issue illustrates. And as the most recent research suggests, it may be premature to conclude that Gaddi pastoralism will shortly disappear, even if its viability is increasingly secured through non-Gaddi labor. What might that mean in the longer term? How might climate change and the expansion in non-Gaddi labor affect Gaddi-Gujjar interactions? Moreover, we know little about how all these dynamics will play out for Gaddis in Jammu, where they are the minority herding community with limited leverage in the event of disputes. Finally, little attention has yet been paid to the marketing of produce—wool and meat—from herding (see Kapila 2011), where there are important trading connections into Punjab to explore, as well as the internal exclusions which hitherto have effectively sidelined the lower Gaddi castes from any but the most limited access to the rewards of the shepherding economy.

## Cultural “Loss” and Heritage Performance

On one of her visits to Chamba as Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi is said to have been given that symbol of traditional Gaddi womanhood, a *luanchari*, at a Gaddi cultural “performance.” Even in Indira Gandhi’s lifetime, Gaddis performed as Himachali icons for the great and good; while the *luanchari* was by then becoming less of a dress for daily wear (with Gaddi women typically having several to choose from, depending on the circumstance), and more of a heritage symbol, to dress up in for weddings. We see this echoed in the growing trend of Gaddi married women wearing a conventional *mangala sūtra*. This is indeed a familiar story around the world (as well as a nostalgic trope of an older anthropology), of cultural “loss” as the by-product of cultural transformation: whether it be now-arcane Gaddi sayings (*muhavara*) that are passing into disuse, Gaddi facial tattoos that are only visible among the oldest generation of Gaddi women, or, around Dharamsala in particular, Gaddi toponymies expressing specific caste histories and Gaddi relationships to nature being lost recently to Tibetan renaming.<sup>10</sup> But it is not only about cultural “loss” in an apolitical sense: new forms of exclusion may also be entailed in such loss.

We briefly sketch here what these shifts mean in relation to Gaddi music, a rich arena for study and one addressed in this issue by Anja Wagner. Gaddi folk music is increasingly commodified in digital mediums and through tribal folk performances of the kind referred to above. The reach of such performances is considerable, going well beyond a Himachali audience. Even National Public Radio in the USA has broadcast Gaddi folk music from the famed Sunil Rana. But with this development, minority expressions are being further marginalized. Most strikingly, only two Hali bards (*ghurāi*) remain in Kangra. These bards travel throughout the region performing for monetary donations and harvested grains (*vīj*). With one hand, they strum on a six-stringed guitar

(*khajarī*), and with another, they drum on the *dhaukī*. Their oral performances were once renowned—and still are for some. But for a younger generation of urbane Gaddis in and around Dharamsala, they are seen as anachronistic, the new urban audience preferring the more polished Gaddi folk performances, exemplified in videos on YouTube (see Wagner in this issue). Despite the technical facility of these new music videos, many deploy the supposedly anachronistic motifs of Gaddiness familiar from previous generations, with Gaddis and Gaddans in *chola* and *luanchari*, performing as if on a break from the shepherding round in a mountain pasture. The live performances of this newer Gaddi music also touch on sensitive areas of Gaddi gender politics. While economic opportunities for women have expanded in urban centers, being a female performer requires personal toughness. With several notable exceptions, it can be difficult for female Gaddi singers and musicians to make their way without critical judgments rooted in newly conservative gender norms (a theme echoed in Kapila 2004 and Simpson 2021).<sup>11</sup>

## Representation

This special issue brings together anthropologists of different generations who have been researching and writing about Gaddis, along with one historian. As we said at the outset, we seek to challenge the common essentialist depiction of Gaddis as a “primordial” tribal group. Instead, we historicize the political context influencing the fluid and contested character of Gaddi identity. But we still need to ask: what is gained and lost by focusing on a community and name—Gaddi—as a basis for identifying and organizing scholarship? One danger is ethnographic insularity, a failure to place the Gaddi experience within a larger North Indian or Himalayan context. We would argue that, on the contrary, the diversity of vantage points brought together here helps to dispel lingering assumptions of cultural and political uniformity across the region and illuminates the connections between Gaddis, their neighbors, and the state. This enables us to present

a more rounded representation of Gaddi life, emphasizing in different papers the implications of writing from different geographical vantage points. Nonetheless, even with this advantage, we acknowledge that our coverage is inevitably partial: most obviously, the articles below are skewed towards the Gaddi experience in Kangra (Christopher, Kapila, Phillimore, Simpson, Wagner), with much less to say about their experience in Chamba (Axelby, Sharma), and especially Gadderan (Bulgheroni), the very place with which Gaddis have historically been most associated.<sup>12</sup>

It is in Kangra that the fault lines of caste contestation and tribal ethnicity are currently greatest, amplified by the campaign waged by high caste Gaddis there for ST recognition, which culminated in 2002, as mentioned earlier. But this is not to suggest that contestation around identity and self-representation is absent on the Chamba side of the Dhauladhar. Richard Axelby's article in this issue turns on its head some of the terms of debate around the desirability of ST status in Kangra. Gaddis in Chamba have had ST status since immediately after Independence. Axelby explores a mood that might seem paradoxical from a Kangra Gaddi perspective—a mood of growing disenchantment among Gaddis with this long-held ST status. He does so by offering a uniquely detailed insight into the intricacies of local alignment in the formal political process, examining the often-unpredictable ways in which Gaddis in one area of Chamba navigate party alignment at and between elections. Axelby's particular vantage point is an area some distance from Bharmour and outside its administrative boundaries, situated much closer to the town of Chamba. The issue here, as Axelby shows, is both about identity and economics in a locality where ST recognition neither assists local solidarities with non-Gaddis nor yields the expected material rewards, which are seen to go to those in the Gaddis' ST heartland, Bharmour.

The discussion above is a salutary illustration of the importance of differing geographical—and indeed

temporal—vantage points for ethnographic analyses and a caution against over-bold generalization—about Gaddis as with any other ethnic category. In this regard, we note that certain other groups of Gaddis go completely unrepresented here: notably Gaddis in Bhaderwah, in Jammu. Christopher (2022d) offers the only insights we have about this group of Gaddis. Not only are they the only Gaddis living (in the main) in Muslim-majority areas,<sup>13</sup> but this is also the only Gaddi community where Sippis have been recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in their own right, alongside and separate from their Gaddi neighbors with equivalent recognition (both attaining ST status in 1991, eleven years prior to high caste Gaddis achieving the same goal in Kangra). It is fair to say that ethnographers have hardly begun to scrape the surface of the Bhaderwah Gaddi/Sippi experience.

Looking further afield, there are Gaddi migrant workers in Goa, Delhi, and abroad in the Gulf, about whose lives little is known. And as we might expect, within the wider Gaddi world, there are, increasingly, vegetarian Gaddis who oppose animal sacrifice, queer Gaddis, Christian Gaddis (though not so far as is known Muslim Gaddis), Dalit Gaddis, and biracial Gaddis. Future scholarship might encompass these still relatively exceptional instances of Gaddiness as they continue to grow and change. We hope this overview inspires new scholarship based on critical ethnography in Gaddi communities. The editors of this special issue have, however, struggled and ultimately failed to find qualified Gaddi researchers who could contribute their own much-needed perspectives. We hope, above all, that in the years ahead, a number of Gaddis may become social scientists to start contributing their representations of the contemporary Gaddi world and the issues that confront them at the time.

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**Peter Phillimore** was Professor of Social Anthropology at Newcastle University, UK, until his retirement. He has a PhD from Durham University based on fieldwork in a Gaddi village in Kangra, and he has kept his connection to that village throughout his life. His introduction to pastoralism through that fieldwork led to a long-term research interest in environmental politics, alongside a later research interest in health and health policy.

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## Endnotes

1. This workshop took place at SOAS on July 18, 2022. Generous funding came from the Ethnographies of Parliaments, Politicians and People programme (2019–2024), no. 834986. Five of the participants (Christopher, Kapila, Phillimore, Simpson, and Wagner) have primarily worked among Gaddis in Kangra. Only Axelby has a primary focus on Chamba. However, Bulgheroni and Sharma, neither of whom could participate on the day, have each submitted articles with a primary focus on Chamba.
2. Among colonial authorities, Lyall seems to have had a particular interest in Gaddis and their way of life, as Christina Noble discusses (1987: 162–171). One possible consequence was a degree of colonial “protection” of Gaddi grazing rights, to an extent denied to other transhumant shepherds in the region, helping to consolidate Gaddis as the primary pastoralists of the region. Kapila has argued (2022: 58): “For the colonial state, to be a pastoralist in the western Himalaya was exclusively associated with being Gaddi and all herders, regardless of their past, were officially classified and returned in the 1881 census as Gaddis.”
3. The Mandal Commission was established in 1979 to identify marginalized groups that were at that time outside the scope of state positive discrimination.
4. Sippis are the exceptional instance here. As Christopher argues (this volume), Sippis have had a vested interest in a primordial identity that, they commonly argue, sets them apart from all other Gaddi low castes and affirms their centrality to Gaddi culture. Their status as *cela* at the Manimahesh pilgrimage is one of several markers of this status.
5. The divergent paths taken by Halis and Sippis are notable. Sippis have largely steered away from rejecting the Gaddi religious practices chosen by some Halis. See note 3 above and Christopher’s article on Sippis (this volume).
6. Phillimore (1991, 2001) had earlier reported from the village of Karnathu and a

few neighboring villages in eastern Kangra an unusual example of female celibacy, in which women who never married adopted male clothing and the possibility of inheriting alongside any brothers. Known as *sādhin*, their name itself shows how they were legitimized as a kind of female ascetic (though those who followed this path rarely dwelt upon the ascetic implication of their name). *Sādhin* were few in number, even around 1980; indeed, the practice has more or less died out and seems unlikely to reappear. These women, who could come from any caste, stood apart from conventional Gaddi marital expectations, and the practice raised important questions about social regulations over women's conduct.

7. William Newell was an exception, contending that Gaddis were only pastoralists out of necessity and downplaying the significance of their pastoralism for their sense of themselves (1967).

8. There have been occasional articles on the impact of climate change on pastoralism in popular environmentalist magazines in India. One of these, looking specifically at Gaddi pastoralism, notes a trend to grazing at ever higher altitudes as the snow disappears for longer periods each year, longer periods spent in these areas to reduce time in winter grazing, greater numbers of livestock deaths at these high altitudes, and increasing grazing tensions or disputes. See *Down to Earth* (23. October 2018): [Climate change in India: Mountains play hocus-focus in Himachal Pradesh \(downtoearth.org.in\)](https://www.downtoearth.org.in).

9. Kapila (2022: 145-147) also discusses status differences among those hired as shepherding labor and refers to those now drawn from non-Gaddis; while Simpson (personal communication) heard that *puhal* were being hired from Rajasthan or Punjab and that it was considered cheaper to hire help in this way than to employ kin to look after flocks.

10. The remarkable Gaddi-Tibetan interface around Dharamsala and the co-constitutive-ness of tribal and refugee identities require further attention (see Christopher 2020b). The dynamics of this relationship are spe-

cific to Kangra, and more precisely, around Dharamsala in western Kangra and Bir in eastern Kangra.

11. In discussing changing Gaddi cultural politics, the special position of Dharamsala as a cosmopolitan hub cannot be overstated. Only there could the 2019 performance of *The Vagina Monologues* by the Pocket Theatre Company have taken place. The cast included Gaddi women and took place in Tibetan, Gaddi, Hindi, and English ([In-do-Tibetan adaptation of 'The Vagina Monologues' to be staged in Dharamsala - The Week](#) (4. March 2020).

12. Sharma's paper straddles both Chamba and Kangra.

13. Although Jammu is a Hindu-majority part of Jammu & Kashmir, Christopher notes (2022d: 22) that Gaddi villages tend to be in Muslim-majority areas. Citing Axelby's (2020) analysis of strategies for the collective advancement of Muslim Gujjars in Chamba, who must compete as ethnoreligious minorities to address their economic marginalization in Himachal Pradesh, Christopher notes, "This dynamic is reversed in J&K as Gaddis/Sippis feel marginalized within the Muslim-dominated ST quota" (2022d: 23).

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