

Book Review

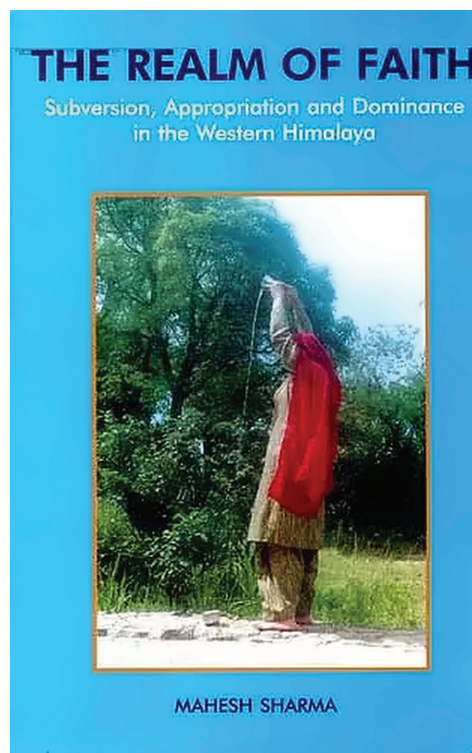
Review of *The Realm of Faith: Subversion, Appropriation, and Dominance in the Western Himalaya* by Mahesh Sharma

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The relevance of Mahesh Sharma's work in contemporary discourse lies in its thorough exploration of the active relationship between indigenous folk practices and Sanskritic tradition within Himachal Pradesh. Rather than viewing folk traditions as residual or peripheral, Sharma situates them within a broader syncretic framework, exploring how localized deities, rituals, and *jatras* (festive processions) were integrated and appropriated through active remodifications of mythological narratives under state-sponsored Sanskritic religious institutions. Contemporary scholarship on Himachal has shifted toward analyzing religious institutions as sites of exercising legislative, executive, and judicial powers within local society (Thakur et al. 2025). Within this discourse, Sharma's work remains foundational because it historicizes the mechanisms through which religion operates as a mechanism of power, offering a structural depth that past ethnographies frequently lack. This book has significantly helped me during my doctoral fieldwork in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, which ethnographically examines how non-upper caste Gaddi groups negotiate subaltern marginalization and state recognition through the interplay of community and religious identity. Sharma's discussion of myths, legends, and social narratives surrounding pastoralist communities, especially the Gaddis, helped me interpret similar narrative forms encountered during my fieldwork, demonstrating how such tales serve as social commentaries that articulate cosmological understandings and collective identity. His analysis directly anticipates current debates on Gaddi tribal recognition, where communities navigate complex political classifications between Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste status to claim state benefits and cultural legitimacy (Christopher 2018).

For a study focused on the tribe-caste continuum, such insights were invaluable in tracing how religious narratives intersect with social hierarchy, mobility, and tribal authenticity. Sharma's analysis begins by detailing how popular religion in the

western Himalayas, including local cults, ancestor worship, and deity politics, interacted with state formation and Brahmanical hegemony. The author traces the integration of independent Thakuries into state revenue structures (pp. 3–5) and demonstrates how state centralization depended on religious standardization to assimilate various sub-societies (p. 4). He differentiates Sanskritic religion from folk belief without oversimplifying internal dynamics (pp. 7–9), using ethnographic examples like fountain stones dedicated to ancestors, *bir* or hero worship in Kangra and Chamba (pp. 8–10), and the elevation of a *churel* (demoness) into a village guardian deity (p. 11) to explain the sacralization of the folk. Early temples in Chamba dedicated to Lakshana Devi and Mahishamardini portrayed these figures as challenging patriarchal authority through their ferocious nature and unmarried status (p. 38). Through legends of Sati, Suhi Mata, and Bharmani Devi, Sharma demonstrates how female sacrifice serves as a mechanism for sacralization and community safeguarding, while social narratives associating sacrifice with fertility and purity reflect a patriarchal authority that honors women for their devotion (pp. 46–51). This analysis resonates with recent ethnographic work on goddess traditions in Himachal, which similarly examines how female deities mediate rapid social change while maintaining adaptive relationships with diverse devotees (Halperin 2019), and with Sax's (2024) examination of divine kingship in the Western Himalaya, which further illuminates how local deities function as political actors within regional power structures.

A critical contribution of the text is its examination of how ritual pollution and divine authority serve as tools of protest for ritually impure castes. It reveals that the subaltern voice is validated through spirit mediums and oracles, whose interventions act as instruments of resistance within peasant society (p. 65). Symbols of dominance embedded in tenancy and *jajmani* relations bound low castes to high-caste landowners (p. 67), yet ritual specialists, particularly the *chela*, used healing and

afflicting abilities to undermine prevailing notions of purity (pp. 83–85). His fieldwork at twelve Sidh shrines illustrates the political and economic dynamics that transformed folk shrines into Brahmanized institutions (p. 95). While charismatic figures like Charpatnath initially localized the Sidh cult and secured royal patronage, these traditions were eventually overshadowed by Sanskritic deities. The distinction between shrines controlled by householder priests and Kanphata Jogis highlights how low-caste *chelas* provided essential ritual mediation and protection from malevolent spirits (p. 98), even as the ritual landscape shifted toward Brahmanization, formalized specialists, and interstate pilgrimage (pp. 110–112). Moreover, Sharma’s documentation of low-caste *chelas* managing Sidh shrines anticipates contemporary research on Nāth and Siddha traditions that examines how ascetic lineages negotiate caste, authority, and popular devotion across South Asia (Bouillier 2018).

The economic underpinnings of these religious structures are further elucidated through an analysis of monastic credit systems. Using a rare *bahi* (account book) from the Dashnami monastery in Thor, Sirmaur, the author reconstructs transactions between Mahants and marginal artisan groups in the 1920s and 1930s (p. 129). This archival source provides a detailed account of the local economy, showing that monastic credit extended beyond economic arrangements. Despite diminishing returns, artisans remained within the *jajmani* system due to the surety of payments in kind and the absence of external markets (pp. 132–139).

Finally, the author examines pilgrimage as both a lived experience and a tool of the state. By juxtaposing textual *tirtha yatra* with local *jatra*, he shows how sacred sites influence religious practices and morality (p. 147). Ethnographic examples like the Madhaun Naga *jatra* reveal how village rituals address everyday needs, forming a parallel framework to the spiritual fulfillment of *tirthas* (p. 149). The state legitimized political power by employing myths and pilgrimage centers, as

seen in tales of Mani Mahesh and Trilochan Mahadev (pp. 158–160), while connecting regional shrines to pan-Indian *pithas* like Kashi and Gaya (pp. 164–166). Sharma’s distinction between *jatra* and *tirtha* anticipates later scholarship that examines how pilgrimage circuits mediate identity, territory, and power in the Himalayas.

The target audience for *The Realm of Faith* includes historians of South Asia, anthropologists of religion and caste, and regional scholars focused on Himachal Pradesh. The book successfully addresses this readership through its rigorous triangulation of archival documents, epigraphic records, oral traditions, and ethnographic fieldwork. Its primary scholarly contribution lies in its refusal to romanticize either “folk authenticity” or “classical purity,” instead demonstrating that subversion and appropriation are mutually constitutive processes. For scholars interested in the study of classical and folk, or Sanskritic and popular religion, this work serves as a foundational text for understanding how these belief systems are appropriated, negotiated, and institutionalized. It offers crucial insights into current scholarly debates on tribal contestation by communities that construct, revise, or depart from earlier interpretations of folk and Sanskritic traditions. In contemporary context, the main limitation of the text is that it views these religious forms largely in a historical frame, leaving less space for how they continue to be lived, negotiated, and reworked in contemporary community life. However, it can be concluded that it remains an essential guide for exploring the religious, social, and local economy of the western Himalayas.

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