



“When in Rome do as Romans do”: Experiencing Kullu as a Swangla Migrant

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The presence of Lahaulis in Kullu is well-documented within early colonial records as those “squatting seasonally in various parts of the town, as labourers and for trade” (Harcourt 1871: 244). In the 1970s, Lahaulis from the Swangla community in the Pattan Valley began to earn enough to invest in building permanent homes in Kullu. This paper highlights the complexities of urbanization in Kullu and the experiences of Swangla migrants, who negotiate their identities and place within the town (Kullu), while navigating traditional practices and cultural norms. The paper focuses further on the presence of Swangla migrants (a Scheduled Tribe from Himachal Pradesh) from the Pattan Valley of Lahaul in the town of Kullu and analyses the dynamics of urbanity in Kullu through their experiences. Metropolitan amenities and pleasant weather constitute a major pull factor for Swanglas. However, their aspiration to shed off traditional identities and prejudice is not achieved with migration as Kullu maintains its connections with rural heritage, reflected in the traditional values and cultural codes that are still adhered to by its inhabitants. The Swanglas respond to these dynamics in various ways, demonstrating their agency in posing their own identity and community in relation to the region. Hence, this paper investigates the dynamic position that Kullu constitutes as a case study of an urbanizing town that reinforces and upholds traditional practices of caste, as part of its lifestyle.

Kullu, Swangla, caste, subaltern, urbanization

Introduction

Himachal Pradesh is one of the Himalayan states of India. It falls in the northwest region of the country. Himachal Pradesh consists of twelve districts. It has a total population of 6,856,509 people, of which only 688,704 live in urban regions, which means around 89.97 percent live in the villages of rural areas. Kullu, a town in Himachal Pradesh, is known for its scenic beauty, cultural heritage, and religious significance (Mehra 2016: 117, Census 2011). It is a small town with a population of approximately 18,306 people, according to the Census Report of 2011. The town serves as the district headquarters of the Kullu district and houses all district-level government offices and state institutions. The town was founded by King Behangami Pal in the 1st century C.E. (the Census district handbook of Kullu District 2011). Lyall (1874: 109) draws a pedigree tree from *Vanshavallis* (generation rolls) retrieved from Kullu Rajah’s family history, which identifies Sudh Singh as the founder of the Singh dynasty. According to estimations, there were fourteen generations before Sudh Singh, whose reign was dated approximately to 1500 AD. Despite its small size, Kullu town is a well-connected region that externally encompasses metropolitan urban features, even while simultaneously holding on to traditional norms and values that contribute to the uniqueness of the region.

I arrived in Kullu town with the intention to understand the experiences of the Swangla community from the neighbouring Lahaul region, who had a history of migration and settlement in Kullu. Beginning with the demonstrative case of Nitish, twenty-nine-year-old Nitish had, for example, always considered Kullu a town where everyone was welcome. But one day, his belief was shattered. At the village Dawara, located along the Kullu-Manali highway, Nitish recounted a significant event. He narrated an incident that left an indelible mark on his psyche. Nitish recounted one afternoon when Dawara was bustling with activity, with devotees flocking to the Vishnu temple for the *bhandara* (community kitchen). Ideally, everyone was welcome to eat at the temple. As the aroma of food filled the air, people began to line up for their share eagerly. Something caught Nitish's attention amidst this chaos, as he saw two young men looking as though they belonged to the Sipi community¹ being singled out and asked to leave the temple premises. Detailing the incident, he exclaimed:

Dawara me Vishnu Mandir me bhandara tha. Sab prasad lene aate hai, kafi rush tha. Jaise hi do Sipi ladke pehchane gaye, sabke samne, nikale gaye. Itna jativaad hai Kullu me, humare Lahaul me bhi aisa nahi karte, mandir, sabha sabki hoti hai.

There was a *bhandara* at the temple in Dawara and everyone gathered to take *prasad*. In a rush, two young Sipi men were identified and were asked to leave the premises. This is the extent of casteism in Kullu. In our Lahaul we never saw this, as temple and public spaces are for everybody.

Nitish was shocked to see the young men being asked to leave because of their caste status. He had never seen anything like it before, and it left him wondering about such caste practices that had become so normalized in Kullu. As I talked to other Swanglas, I discovered that Nitish's experience was not a stand-alone experience and that the Swanglas were largely viewed as outsiders in Kullu. Since they were migrants, they were unaware of such caste practices. Their migrant status made it difficult for them to navigate the rigidity of the caste system that was deeply ingrained in the town's culture. These experiences evolved into moments that evoked conversation within the Swangla circles about experiences of building identity and status, experiencing caste, and the degree of severity of caste practices in Kullu. They had witnessed or heard about how Dalits were not allowed into the temple premises or were barred from accessing public spaces equally. But what was particularly interesting, was that despite the challenges that they faced, the Swanglas had a deep attachment to Kullu. For many of them, it was a place where they had grown up, or had family connections. They saw the town not just as an urban space but as a relational space that held onto its rural linkages and kept up with traditional values.

Through their experiences, I began to see Kullu in a new light. A town that was changing rapidly, with new buildings and emerging infrastructure. However, the town's metropolitan features were also intertwined with its rural linkages and traditional values, creating spaces that were simultaneously modern and caste-restrictive. In my

¹ Sipsis were communities traditionally associated with drum-beating, in the Lahaul region. They, along with Lohars comprise of Dalits among the Swanglas.

conversation with Swangla interlocutors, I learned about their experiences negotiating identity in Kullu and their experiences of working around the rigid caste system of Kullu characterized by the struggle to carve out their own space. This paper explores the experiences and everyday negotiation of being identified as an outsider, which necessitates working around the rigid caste system of Kullu. The Dalit Swanglas negotiate the casteist mentality in Kullu and respond to discrimination in multivalent ways to adapt to and situate themselves within Kullu. Finally, the paper concludes by reflecting on their multivalent responses to discrimination, which involves navigating their own identity and relationality with Kullu town and its social structure.

Kullu: A Brief History

Kullu is a small town located in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Its history dates back to ancient times and is shrouded in mythology and legends. The historical records of the town trace back to the reign of the Kullu Kings. Initially, the kings ruled from Jagatsukh for twelve generations until Raja Visudh Pal shifted the capital to Naggar. The capital was later shifted to Sultanpur by Raja Jagat Singh. According to legend, a Brahmin cursed Raja Jagat Singh during his reign, causing him to suffer from grievous illness. Jagat Singh moved a revered image of Lord Raghunath from Ayodhya to Kullu in an effort to alleviate the ailment. After placing the idol on the throne and offering himself as a sacrifice in God's service, the curse was lifted. Thenceforth, the Kings of Kullu governed the state in the name of Raghunath, who became the primary deity of the Kullu Valley. In the British era, Kullu was designated as a Tehsil under the Kangra district, Punjab. Following India's independence in 1947, Kullu became a part of the Indian Union.

Today, Kullu is a town known for its scenic beauty, apple orchards, and handicrafts. The town is surrounded by snow-capped mountains, with the Beas river flowing through it. Kullu is also known for its annual Dussehra festival, which attracts thousands of tourists from all over the world. The Singh dynasty of Kullu was said to have fought many battles with neighbouring kingdoms, especially with Chamba and Ladakh, to establish its hold over Lahaul region. Thus, for most of its written history (Hutchison and Vogel 1933, Shabab 1996, Balram 2017), the Lahaul region was under Kullu kings and later on, briefly under Sikh rule in 1839. In March 1846, after the first Anglo-Sikh war was concluded, the trans-Sutlej states of Jullundur Doab and the hill country between the Sutlej and the Ravi were ceded to the British by the Sikhs (Harcourt 1871: 39). Kullu with Lahaul and Spiti became part of the new district of Kangra. It was only in 1960 that the Kullu district and the Lahaul and Spiti district got separated from Kangra.

Of the total population of Himachal Pradesh, around 89.97 percent live in rural areas. In the Kullu district alone, 90.55 percent of the population lives in rural areas as per the last census report (Census of India 2011). Kullu district has five towns: Banjar, Bhuntar, Kullu, Manali, and Shamshi. Apart from Banjar, all the other four towns fall under Kullu Tehsil and are located on the 50-kilometre stretch of NH-21 highway—the Kullu-Manali highway. In fact, Kullu, Shamshi, and Bhuntar form a single stretch of approximately 10km referred to as the metropolitan region by Mehra (2016, 2017).

Mehra, who was part of 'Suburbin',² a research project on subaltern urbanisation in India used Kullu town as her case study. Denis and Zérah (2017: 53) define the term subaltern urbanisation as "the growth of settlement agglomerations, whether denoted urban by the Census of India or not, that are independent of the metropolis and autonomous in their interactions with other settlements, local and global." They further argue that subaltern urbanisation reconstitutes the agency of small towns to reveal unique forms of urbanising. Graded inequality in terms of accretive citizenship, new migrants, old/settled migrants, and natives, has been studied by Mehra (2016, 2017) who conducted a detailed field study in Kullu. However, it misses out on the deep-seated, caste-based, and regional/ racial biases of Kullu town which can only be understood through an analysis of perspective, and the recounted experiences of subaltern communities like the Swangla migrants.³ Kullu has a mixture of rural and urban features, reflected both in form and spirit. The narrow lanes of Raghunathpur, Sultanpur and Akhara Bazaar, are a reminiscent of the old town. At the same time Dhalpur market, and the peripheral neighbourhoods of Ramshila and Hanumanibagh are crowded with new residential constructions. The town constantly resounds with the noise of construction machinery, as new buildings are built every day, with the town's growth seeming almost exponential.

From Lahaul to Kullu: Tracing the Swangla Migration

The term Lahauli is commonly used to identify people native to Lahaul. The origin of this regional identity dates back to the rule of Raja Man Singh of Kullu, 1672 to 1717, when he created separate administrative units called Waziris- Lahaul, Ujh, Parol, Rupi, Lag Sari, Lag Maharajha and others. Each Waziri was under the charge of a separate Wazir (Harcourt 1871: 34; Hutchinson and Vogel 1933: 413). According to Lyall (1874: 166), the acquisition of the Lahaul Waziri of Kullu was first made during the reign of King Bidhi Singh from Chamba. It is speculated that the king of Chamba had annexed Lahaul into his territory that was at the time under the influence of Ladakh. However, Lyall also takes note of another somewhat unlikely story of Bidhi Singh of Kullu receiving Lahaul in dowry after he married the daughter of another king from Chamba called Chattar Singh (ibid.: 166).

Despite coming under Kullu's direct rule in the colonial period, Lahaul continued to be governed by local chiefs known as Thakurs and Ranas, who paid hefty tributes to the King. Lyall further observes that Thakurs, along with one man from each holding in royal *Kothis*,⁴ were compelled to attend to and serve the king of Kullu for six months, entailing a wide range of tasks from menial to military (ibid: 170). Thus, Lyall implies that this was probably "the origin of the yearly emigration of a very large population of Lahaulis in Akhara, a suburb of Sultanpur" (ibid: 170). Early colonial records also acknowledge the division of Lahaul into the three valleys of Gara or Bhaga valley,

² for more details, cf. project website: <https://suburbin.hypotheses.org/>. Accessed 05.01.2023.

³ Notably, a large section of Swanglas claim and enjoy a Hindu upper-caste Hindu status. But in Kullu, they are the Other. In terms of this relationality Swanglas can be seen as subaltern for their intersectional identity: Swangla as a Scheduled tribes, Swangla migrants, etc..

⁴ Waziris were subdivided into revenue estates called *Kothis* (Shabab 1996: 36). Lahaul *Waziri* comprised of 14 *Kothis*.

Rangloi/Tinan or Chandra valley, and Pattan or Chandrabhaga valley (Lyll 1874, Harcourt 1871, Hutchison and Vogel 1933). There is ambiguity though, in the description of the people living in Lahaul. Lyll (1874) notes the presence of Tibetans, Brahmins, and Kanets (ibid). Harcourt (1871) provides further details by providing numbers that are probably incorrect. Nevertheless, all documenters point to the presence of Brahmins and Hindus in the Pattan valley. However, it shall be noted that even colonial administrators and scholars have identified and written separately about the Hindus of Pattan Valley and the Bodh/Tibetans of the remaining region.⁵ Many recent scholarly works (Kumar 2004; Mehra 2016,2017) have used the term Lahauli/Lahaula which is generalising and popularly used. Such generalizations invisibilize the differences between the Scheduled tribe communities residing in the region which often leads to the exclusion of the Swangla identity.

Swanglas who are classified as an ST (Scheduled Tribe), are considered native to the Lahaul and the Spiti districts of Himachal Pradesh. The Census of India, 2011 report records a population of 9,630 Swanglas, with a majority of the community (6,856) residing in Lahaul and Spiti. The highest number of their settlement outside the district (2,626) reside in neighbouring Kullu district. Swanglas follow Hinduism and claim to be upper-caste. While marrying a man of the Bodh caste would change the wife's caste to Bodh, marrying a woman of the Bodh caste would lower the status of the Swangla husband to that of Garu caste (a sub-caste of Swanglas). Swanglas are known to distance themselves from the Sipis, Lohars (considered the Dalits of Lahaul), and do not inter-marry. Swanglas are primarily engaged in subsistence farming and pastoralism, with seasonal migration to Kullu or Chamba for work, which typically entails physical labour. Bhots engaged in trade, while Swanglas were agriculturalists and worked as agricultural labourers when they came to Kullu. In general, the agricultural lands of Lahaul are dry, and constitute a desolate terrain with a minimum of green pastures when compared to the dense deodar, oak, and pine forests of Kullu, situated across the Rohtang Pass.

However, the Pattan valley also stands out as it is known for its greener and more cultivable lands, which are well-maintained and appreciated by Lyll (1874: 159). Additionally, the Pattan valley is home to Brahmins and other Hindus communities that identify themselves as Swangla. They were primarily engaged in subsistence farming and pastoralism. Interestingly, none of the Swangla interlocutors interviewed during field investigations remembered their kin or other villagers who would earlier go to Kullu for transhumance and wool trade. It is possible that mentions of Lahaulis as wool traders and transhumant community (Mehra 2017: 305, Singh 2018: 170) point to Bhots and not Swanglas. However, at least one family member, usually male Swangla, seasonally migrated to Kullu or Chamba for work. Historical records have confirmed that Lahaulis were traders who crossed through Leh and carried borax, wool, salt, and precious stones across Leh and Kullu, which constituted the gateway to the plains of Punjab. The State Gazetteers and other settlement reports have also documented the traditional involvement of Lahaulis in trading activities (Kumar 2004, Singh 1998,

⁵ The present Bodh/ Bhot Scheduled Tribe was enumerated as Tibetan in The Constitution Order of 1950, which was changed to Bodh/ Bhot in the Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act in 1956 along with Swanglas being enumerated as Scheduled Tribe in Punjab.

Mehra 2017). Furthermore, Mehra (2017), in her research has also discovered an old and traditional business community of Lahaulis in Kullu. However, traditionally speaking, it was the Bhot community that had also engaged in trade, while Swanglas of Pattan were mainly agriculturalists, who were seasonal labour migrants and smaller tradesmen. While the colonial records do not use the term Swangla but call them Brahmins or Hindus (Harcourt 1871, Lyall 1874, Hutchison and Vogel 1933). The first list of Scheduled Tribes through Constitutional Order of 1950 only had Tibetans as Scheduled Tribes on the list in Punjab, while the entire Himachal region was given Scheduled Tribe Area status. This was also a result of the agitation led by local leaders and activists of Lahaul, who demanded this Scheduled Tribe status from the government for their region. Since the Hindus were the only group left over that did not have any constitutional protection, Balram (2017) notes how Basant Ram of Ruding village took a delegation asking the government to give the Hindus a Scheduled Tribe status that was equivalent to the Buddhists of the region. Hindus were hence given the nomenclature of Swangla, which was a colloquial term for Brahmin in the Manchand dialect, spoken in the Pattan valley of Lahaul.

According to Kumar (2004: 222), the post-China War era in Lahaul valley saw a setback in trade with Tibet, and the flourishing of agriculture with support from government intervention. Swanglas, who were primarily agriculturalists, experienced growth over time during this period. Kumar divides this period of economic development in the Lahaul valley into three phases: the Kuth phase in the 1950s and 1960s, the potato phase from the 1960s onwards, that matured in the 1970s, and the peas, hops, and other cash crops phase from the 1980s onwards. These phases also applied to Swanglas. In the early 1950s and 1960s, it was predominantly the Bhots who settled in Kullu leading to an improvement in their social status, but with an agricultural surplus, Swanglas also caught up with this affluence. The entire population of Pattan was recognized by the state, when according them the Swangla Schedule Tribe status, and thus the government did not differentiate or recognize castes that were within the community.

Therefore, it is quite surprising that even colonial reports had a detailed record of Swangla castes, although slightly inaccurate in number and estimation. The fact that caste divisions were present was completely ignored by the government. Harcourt (1871:127) documents the presence of 216 Brahmins, 502 Kanets and 4,566 Daghees, including Lohars (blacksmiths) within the community. He also mentions the presence of 10 Sawyers (goldsmiths) and three Hesis (Sipis or musicians) within the Swangla community. At present, the social stratification of Swanglas of Pattan includes Brahmins or Swangla at the top of the caste hierarchy. Swanglas or Brahmins did not intermingle with other castes, and this correlates Harcourt's estimations with my field observation, though I do think he confused Garus with Daghees (a term used for Dalits). Next below them, came the sub-section of Swangla Garus, born out of Swangla masculine and Bhot/Bodh feminine union. If two consecutive generations of Swangla or Garu men bring Bhot/Buddhist women into the family through inter-marriage, the entire family is considered Buddhist-Swangla, a section that is located below the Garus in their caste hierarchy. The lowest rung is inhabited by the Dalit castes: the Sipi and Lohar. The Sipis are musicians and artists, also responsible for funeral-related

processions and ritual organization, while Lohars are blacksmiths who make, and repair implements. Both are considered hereditary occupational castes and receive cash or kind in return for their services. They are considered to be outside the commensal circle of upper-caste Swanglas, and are victims of untouchability practices followed in the region. Comparing caste practices of Pattan valley to those of Kullu town, reveals that untouchability practices are followed in both regions. However, in Kullu town, caste divisions are more pronounced, and the practice of untouchability is more severe.

The region of Lahaul is known for its harsh climate and limited resources, which contributed to its perceived 'backwardness'. Until the 1960s, the only access to the area was through walking paths for passengers and mules. However, following the India-China war, a motorable road was constructed that connected Lahaul to Manali-Leh in 1964 (Sahni quoted in Kumar 2004: 226). Due to the area's history of struggle and poverty, the seasonal migration of Lahaulis to Kullu transformed into permanent settlements. Kullu was a well-known region for Lahaulis in any case, even before the British era, serving as their administrative headquarters. *Chandertal*,⁶ a regional magazine run by the *Lahauli Kala Manch*, often features articles on folk songs and tales, that include stories about how news from the Kullu king's court would take days to reach Lahaul. British records also indicate that due to the difficulty of managing Lahaul directly, the Kullu king would grant controlled sovereignty to local chiefs or Thakurs in exchange for heavy tribute and the eliciting of military services from them (Singh 2018: 13-14). The challenges of Lahaul's remote location and difficult environment have led to a history of struggle and poverty for its inhabitants, and Lahaulis have found innumerable ways to adapt to their challenges and develop despite of them.

Spatial Organization of Tribe and Caste Neighbourhoods in Kullu

The Swangla migrants' journey to Kullu valley begins with their crossing of the Rohtang Pass. The descent to the valley is marked by a transition from sparsely populated villages and hamlets to a lush green but crowded region, including the tourist hub of Manali and the much sought-after Kullu metropolitan region. According to Mehra (2017: 299), most Lahauli (Swanglas) migrate to urban regions to spend or invest their income surplus, and to seek educational facilities, health care, job opportunities, and eventually a place to settle down permanently.

In the 1960s, there was a large pull trend for students to enrol at schools in Manali, which offered free hostel facilities, especially for the Scheduled Tribes. A few houses belonging to Swanglas served as transit homes during this period, and over the decades, there has been a proliferation of Lahauli and Swangla residential pockets emerging throughout the region. While the oldest settlements of Lahaulis in Kullu consisted of Bodh traders, the Swanglas also managed to build exclusive Swangla residential pockets. Generally, it can be said that Lahauli neighbourhoods are exclusive and also peripheral, consisting of a mix of Bodh and Swangla households. Kullu town

⁶ A regional magazine in Hindi (Devanagari). The online repository of the magazine can be accessed through: <http://chandertal.com/>. Accessed 12.12.2022.

has several neighbourhoods that consist of substantial Lahauli populations. The Swanglas interviewed for this paper, resided mostly in Sultanpur, Hanumanibag, and Ramshila localities of Kullu. Many of them had kinsmen and families in the nearby villages of Katrain, Dawara, and Gadori, or belonged to inhabitations that were part of the larger urban stretch between Kullu and Bhuntar. As a result, the entire region enjoyed a close-knit network of kinship and commensality. Sultanpur constitutes the oldest settlement out of the three, while Ramshila has the newest constructions. Swangla Dalits have mostly built their residences in Ramshila, migrating to the locality at a later stage. The separate village of Bashing is known to be a Dalit village, where Dalit Swanglas have settled in fairly good numbers. Bashing village consists of fourteen Dalit Swanglas (Sipi and Lohar) households.

Sultanpur and Ramshila are located at the two extreme peripheries of the town across the river Beas, and both have pockets of exclusive neighbourhoods that are inhabited by Swanglas. As they are at a larger distance away from the town, they sport newer urban constructions and broader roads. Hanumanibagh is another Swangla neighbourhood that is located right below the Kullu Hospital in Dhalpur. As a space, it is very crowded and houses only people from Lahaul-Swanglas and Bodh/ Bhots. As migrants collectively sharing a migrant identity within the neighbourhoods of Kullu with Bodhs/ Bhots, Swanglas become identified as Lahauli or Lahaule. Having exclusive Lahauli neighbourhoods hints on spatial segregation present in Kullu, either the Kullu*walabs* only give peripheral lands to Lahaulis, or Lahaulis prefer to buy affordable peripheral lands together to create exclusive pockets, either way, a clear distinction is maintained between Kullu*walabs* and Lahaulis. Furthermore, the Dalits of Kullu and Lahaul seem to live together in separate neighbourhoods.

Kumar and Baraik (2021: 156) in the context of Jharkhand states that "the preference for tribal habitation has mostly been in and around the already existing tribal localities", he even noticed a few rich affluent tribal homes present within impoverished tribal colonies. Even when the region undergoes urbanisation, urbanism in the terms of Wirth (1938) is not achieved where he assumed "the weakening of bonds of kinship and family, there will be undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity" (Wirth 1938: 195). The belief that urbanization can help overcome ethnic segregation and traditional biases of caste prejudice has been flouted by various studies done on Indian cities and towns (Mehta 1969, Vithayathil and Singh 2012; Bharathi et al. 2021, Gattupalli 2022).

Till date even in urban areas, Dalits in large proportions are employed in manual scavenging jobs like cleaning septic tanks, which is a form of structural violence against them (Darokar 2018). Spatial segregation is also practiced in the name of keeping the neighbourhood 'neat and tidy' where 'only good people' is the phrase used to discriminate between castes (Vithayathil et al. 2018: 64). In the neighbourhoods of the Dalits and destitute there is also corresponding dearth of better facilities of healthcare, nearby schools and water (Sidhwani 2015: 55) It is still maintained that in urban spaces overt forms of caste practices are minimised which is challenged in this study where Swanglas notice anomalies which would have been missed if narratives of subaltern experiences were not taken into account.

Migration with Prosperity: Settlement with Habit

Mehra's (2017: 306) research affirms the saying that "one who comes to Kullu remains." She provides examples of Punjabi shopkeepers, Prajapati Kumhars, migrants from other parts of Himachal such as Mandi, Bilaspur, Hamirpur, Shimla, and even Lahaulis who find Kullu accommodating and accepting. Mehra argues that the appeal of Kullu lies in its peaceful atmosphere and unique urban character that is not driven by aggressive accumulation or corporatism. The town's values stem from its close connection to the rural areas surrounding it, as it experiences an exchange of horticultural products between the urban and rural regions. The resultant surplus is utilised to construct modern urban infrastructure to expand the metropolitan expanse of Kullu.

The significance of Mehra's research in this respect lies in highlighting the influence of the town's geographical proximity to rural areas and the interactions between urban and rural communities on the development of value systems and identity formation. Moreover, Mehra (2017: 303) underscores the significance of accretive citizenship in cultivating a sense of belonging and feeling of inclusion. The concept of accretive citizenship refers to the progressive incorporation of immigrants into their respective host societies, leading to their eventual complete integration and active participation as members of the community. The process involves integrating economic and social factors to stimulate the local economy and strengthen neighbourhood connections. The phenomenon of mutual benefit is subject to the influence of multiple factors, including but not limited to power dynamics, migration histories, and socio-economic conditions. Mehra's study of Kullu exemplifies the concept of accretive citizenship. Swanglas have found success in Kullu's construction industry as carpenters, masons, and labourers, secured employment as teachers, bankers, or government officials (Mehra 2017: 305). Their upward mobility can be attributed to their accretive citizenship, as they gain access to material resources and develop a stronger sense of belonging through adopting Kullu traditions and identities.

However, Mehra also acknowledges a complex relationship between Lahauli migrants and *Kulluwahs* (those from Kullu). Some Lahaulis express mistrust towards *Kulluwahs*, perceiving attempts to hinder their progress (Mehra 2017: 306). While many Lahaulis still maintain summer residences in their hometown or the countryside of Kullu, an increasing number choose to make Lahaul their permanent home, driven by Kullu's milder winters, particularly appealing to former government employees (Mehra 2017: 299). Mehra's argument on accretive citizenship adds complexity to this dynamic, as Lahauli migrants who become part of the local community gain an extended sense of belonging and ownership, contributing to the community's development and earning acceptance from *Kulluwahs*. Wealth and mobility play significant roles in the process, as those with accumulated wealth and positions of power are more readily accepted as community members. Kumar (2004) examines Lahaulis' experiences in Kullu, focusing on development and social mobility. He observes that Lahaulis employ spatial mobility strategies not only to sustain their lives but also to achieve upward social mobility. Migration to locations beyond Lahaul enables them to acquire new skills, adopt modern ideas and techniques, access higher

education, and engage in diverse occupations and economic activities. Kumar's research underscores the importance of spatial mobility from Lahaul to Kullu as a strategy for community self-development and social mobility, particularly in challenging ecological conditions

Experiencing Rigid Caste Practices

The Swanglas consider themselves to be fairly settled in the region of Kullu town, as they participate in the religious functions that take place at the temples and participate actively in electoral politics. But they are aware of how in Kullu they needed to behave in a certain way, to indicate that they agreed with the caste practices of the region. A complex web of caste relations and practices exist in Kullu town. Despite attempts at assimilation and participation in local customs, Swanglas, a community that includes two Dalit castes (Sipi and Lohar), still struggle to integrate, and often face discrimination from dominant caste groups, as reported by Ajai Kumar, in the late 1990s. More recently, in 2021, I interviewed 83 Swangla individuals from all castes, across different age groups to have a cross-generational understanding of the experience of being a Swangla in Kullu: 13 individuals between the ages of 18 to 25; 28 individuals between the ages of 26 to 40; 26 individuals between the ages of 41 and 60; and 16 individuals who were above 60 years of age. A key observation made during interviews was the fact that the caste system of Kullu was much more rigid compared to that of Lahaul, the native place of most Swanglas. Not a single informant disagreed with the premise about Kullu's caste system being more ossified. Shaina, a twenty-year old Garu girl, said that while there were no Dalits in her village back in Lahaul, she emphasized how the two Dalit students that came to school from the neighbouring village never faced any discriminatory practices. On the other hand, when talking about Kullu she remarked:

local log baithte bhi nahi hai Daghee ke sath

kullawalahs will not even sit next to a lower caste person

Similarly, Nisha, age twenty-one, claimed that she witnessed the same anti-lower-caste behaviour that Nitish had recounted that is quoted above in the introduction section, when she said:

humare Lahaul me aisa nahi hota. Mandiro me sab ek hai. Islie shayad wo ladke bhi ander aa gae. Local logo ne kafi bada scene bana diya

In our Lahaul, everyone is one in the temple. That must be the reason the boys entered the temple. The Local people made such a big scene of it

Similarly, Shipra, a school teacher in Kullu, in her thirties, who said she was born and brought up in Kullu, claims that though she is more familiar with Kullu culture and language, she still gets taunts for being a Lahauli. She candidly said:

ke tumare toh nepalion jaise koi lag-chaar ni hote

Like Nepalese workers you have no culture

I wonder whether the reference to Nepalese is due to the fact that Swanglas are seen as a labouring class or due to their facial similarity in racial and physical characteristics with persons of Nepali origin, or both. The interviewee in this case spoke about their own 'progressive' mindset and their willingness to let their children befriend anyone they wished. However, Palmo, a mother of two in her forties living in the Ramshila neighbourhood claimed that this same progressive thinking could not be extended to Harijans, and that Harijan friends would not be allowed to enter their homes due to the fear of a social boycott by locals. Donning modern thinking and an urban Swangla identity, Palmo blatantly ignored the fact that in rural and traditional Swangla homes, other lower castes such as Sipi and Lohar were also not welcomed inside, and were relegated to the outside gallery where shoes were kept. Hence, following Mehra's argument, that accretive citizenship is a form of belongingness that is built over time and is based on the accumulation of experiences, practices and identities, Swanglas in Kullu often begin to follow local practices that entail caste-ism in order to assimilate themselves into the town. Interviewing college-going Swanglas, I noted that they had a mixed circle of friends. Though they also had *caste-friends* (a term used for Dalits), they avoided eating their food with them or bringing them home. They also knew that marrying Buddhists was possible, as was inter-marriage with other high-castes of Kullu, Mandi, neighbouring towns and cities. But marrying a Dalit was prohibited and unheard of. Sumant a resident of the Shamshi neighbourhood in his late sixties, and a Garu from Jundha village, shared an incident during his interview to explain the prevalent caste-discrimination practices of Kullu. When Swanglas moved to Kullu, they initially attempted to transcend caste and stick together, as they shared an identity. In that vein, he noted,

I am told of Raghu, who was appointed to a Rajput village school in the Anni region of Kullu. When Raghu arrived, Omi, a Sipi from Raghu's village, was already working there. Raghu did not want to reveal Omi's status as an untouchable because he knew Omi would be treated differently, forced to sit outside, no one would share meals with him, and no one would rent him a room because the hamlet was made up of only high caste people. During gatherings, Raghu would consume the first serving before Omi and stop after he had finished. Someone saw this happening often, called attention to it, and revealed that Omi must be of an untouchable caste. He was beaten and thrown out of the village. Raghu tried his best to avoid this situation, but he could not eat from where a Sipi did.

Dalit Experience in Kullu: A Radical Collective and a Close-knit Community

The Dalit experience of Kullu among informants is distinct from that of other Swanglas. When the Swanglas initially came to Kullu for work, they stayed in the vicinity of their landlords or the contractors that hired them. The Dalits would rent a room and live together in the town. On the other hand, the Dalits did not have memories of sharing space with 'locals'. Sipsis and Lohars living together in Shishamati (in Kullu) remember the social activist Lal Chand Dhissa, when talking about the initial migration of Dalits to

Kullu. They said, it was caste affinity that worked in Kullu, compared to regional affinity. So a Daghee (Dalit castes of Kullu—the Hesis, Kolis etc.) in Kullu was more likely to help them than a Swangla from their own village. Gradually, as Dalits also began earning well and saving enough money to buy land in Kullu, they settled in neighbourhoods located at the peripheries of Kullu, away from upper-caste Swangla settlements. Lal Chand Dhissa, a Dalit Adivasi activist from Jahalman village of Lahaul and a resident of the Bashing village mentioned above, shared details of how life in Jahalman entailed the internal segregation of lower-caste communities from the main village of upper-castes. This form of spatial segregation resulted in the formation of a separate neighbourhood of Dalits known as *Jahalman-Gadbog*. Bashing was exactly such a separate settlement nearby Kullu, where Dalits lived as an independent community in a distinct locality. Dhissa recounted how it was always nice to have one's own people around, especially for purposes of *jeena-marna*.⁷ There was also a separate organization called *Dalit Janajatiya Sangharsh Sangathan*, loosely translated as Scheduled tribe Dalit Struggle Organization, which is a united political platform for Scheduled Tribe Dalits across Himachal Pradesh.⁸ He discusses the problems of Dalit *jeena-marna* and further adds here:

humari biradri number me kam hai isliye humne clubs bana rakhe hai. Bhuntar se Manali tak pehle ek hi tha, ab Bhuntar se Kullu alag hai, Kullu se Raison ek, aur ek Raison se Manali. Ek awaz pe sab ekatthe ho jate hai.

Our community is less in number, and so we have formed clubs. Bhuntar to Manali, we used to have one club, now it is divided into three: Bhuntar to Kullu, Kullu to Raison, and Raison to Manali. At one call, we all unite at once.

He further describes how Lohars were smaller in number when he first came to Kullu; and how Sipis and Lohars stayed together for the first two decades of their life in Kullu. They were also part of the same clubs and associations and shared a similarity in their language and in their experiences with caste discrimination. But these incipient groups also started breaking-up, as the number of community members increased. Another interlocutor Pushpa, aged forty-five, who I interviewed in Jahalman village in Lahaul, stated that though there were a smaller number of Dalit households in villages: only five households in Jahalman village and three in Shansha village, matters looked different in Kullu. In Kullu, Dalits had their own neighbourhoods consisting of around 40 to 45 families that lived together, and hence were not that small in number. In relation to the population settled in Kullu town, she demonstrated the close connections and belongingness that people from the same community within the region had with each other. Rina, another interlocutor, and a friend from the Sipi community who recently moved to Kullu to her relatives for furthering the education of her children, flaunted her family networks in Kullu. She proudly recounted that her brother worked at the post of S.H.O. (Station House Officer) in the police force in Kullu. Her uncle worked as a college lecturer, while her sister's husband ran a grocery shop in Dohlnala village, located on the Kullu-Manali highway. Another interlocutor called

⁷ *Jeena-marna* is idiomatic for the rituals of birth and death.

⁸ Scheduled Tribe Dalit is not a recognised category by the State. For more details cf. Christopher (2020), on Dalit Gaddis in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh.

Ramlal, a person from the Sipi community in his early fifties, who assisted his younger brother with transporting material from towns like Kullu and Mandi, to their village shop in Jahalman market, spoke on similar subjects. He travelled to and fro frequently, every other week, and shared how the Sipi community, which used to depend on the mercy of upper-castes was forced to accept defiling jobs. He shared his belief about the community originally hailing from an upper-caste background, who were forced, due to their poverty, into occupations that reduced their caste status to that of untouchables. He substantiated his point by sharing an origin myth of the Sipi community that identified the Sipis as the children of the brother of an upper-caste man, who had chosen to eat beef while hungry and trapped in the desert. But because he consumed beef, he became identified as *Sipi* or a person of an untouchable status, while the younger brother who had suffered no such privation, remained pure, with his children being identified as Swangla. The second point he made challenged the general belief that the untouchable community could not access the Sanskrit language. Surprisingly, most words in the language spoken by the Sipis have Sanskrit origin. It could therefore be concluded according to him that Sipis were also of high-caste origin and later accorded outcaste status by Swanglas in the remote countryside of Lahaul that was dominated by Swanglas. Further, Ramlal and his brother Sumit shared many stories about community prosperity in the interview, describing how this prosperity was gradually pouring into their community. They also shared how, even though they have received benefits from the reservation system of the country, which was quite late due to their poverty, their community did not understand the value of education as quickly as was perhaps required. He explained how reservation was tricky: if one were classified as SC (Scheduled Castes), one had to compete with other SC from towns and cities. If one became enumerated as an ST, then the upper-caste STs of Lahaul had the advantage. It was only through sub-reservation in Lahaul and Spiti that the Sipis leverage their own position. Now, as their community members were gradually taking to education, they were attempting to help and reform their community. Sumit remembered how, at social gatherings like weddings earlier on, their urban kinsmen would discuss the benefits of reservation and education. They attempted to convince everyone of their caste in the village to give up their hereditary drum-beating profession as it was a defiling job⁹. The villagers were threatened by the superstition that God will punish them if they quit drum-beating in village and temple functions. It was with gradual understanding that the struggle to organise and participate in the pan-Himalayan *Janajatiya Dalit Sangathan* gained traction, discussing various social issues concerning Scheduled Tribe Dalits in the state.

According to Ainley, Coleman, and Becker (1986), an important aspect in understanding the process of how stigma and discrimination take place is by examining the efforts that are taken towards de-stigmatization. They suggest that these efforts can be classified into two categories: those that focus on similarity and those that focus on difference. For Dalits in the Lahaul region, who experience the double-stigmatization of being both Dalit and Lahauli, there have been a few instances where

⁹ Drum-beating is considered a defiling job as the skin of the drum is traditionally made from hide which is considered ritually impure in Hindu society. This is why the profession and those connected to it are considered to belong to a polluted/ defiled caste who are capable of polluting others on physical contact.

individuals have tried to transcend the stigma by utilizing an ambiguous self-identification when in urban settings. During my fieldwork, I spoke on similar matters with Raj, a 61-year-old man from the Sipi community who was a retired government employee. The village Raj is from is called *Yambe*; consequently, everyone from the village should be called Yamba. But only one influential upper-caste family uses this title. He chose to use the same title with his name as a way of asserting his identity and negotiating the stigma and humiliation he faced. It was not uncommon for Dalits in the region to cope with caste stigma by either dropping their last names or adopting an upper-caste surname. Swanglas in my fieldwork region expressed frustration with this recent trend that had Sipsis and Lohars use Swangla as their surname.

Conclusion

For the Swanglas, especially for their lower-caste communities, living and working in Kullu can be a challenging experience. They are confronted with the challenge of negotiating their identity as migrants while facing the realities of a town that is structured around strict caste hierarchies in its socio-religious interactions. They encounter prejudice and are denied access to communal spaces, such as temples, within the locality of Kullu. While this underscores the critical importance of dealing with casteism and spatial segregation, the lived experiences of Swanglas in Kullu town reveal the challenges of doing so. They must negotiate their identity as migrants, as well as their position in the rigid caste system that governs the sociality in the town. The entrenched social norms that regulate social interactions in Kullu have exhibited a high degree of rigidity and have demonstrated resilience against legal reforms that seek to foster inclusivity and egalitarianism. The Swanglas residing in Kullu town face challenges in comprehending their social identity and encounter obstacles in integrating with the dominant castes while simultaneously asserting their own distinct social identity. The Swanglas' efforts to mitigate the stigma attached to their social status are evident in their actions, which oscillate between emphasising their similarities with the dominant castes and their practises, and equally asserting their differences. The narratives surrounding the Swanglas serve as a testament to the lived experiences of a subaltern community within the town of Kullu. This community's stories highlight the ongoing tension between longstanding cultural traditions and contemporary social ideologies.

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