

India

Chetan Singh, *Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions*

Albany: SUNY Press, 2019. Xi + 303 pages, tables, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$95.00; paperback, \$27.95. ISBN: 9781438475219 (hardcover), 9781438475226 (paperback).

Chetan Singh is a historian who has had a long and distinguished career studying the Western Himalayas, and this book is a collection of mostly previously published articles that focus on religion, polity, pastoral communities and cultures, trade, and urban growth. The book is divided into fourteen chapters that include an introduction. Singh sets the stage for the book in the first three chapters by emphasizing the need for a regional approach that explores the agro-pastoral world of the Western Himalayas (mostly covering the present-day Indian state of Himachal Pradesh). Drawing on insights from the disciplines of geography, anthropology, and sociology, Singh employs oral history and colonial documents along with insights from these disciplines to lay out the historical emergence of the space of the Western Himalayas. Throughout this process, the dynamics of community formation within the wider context of the environment, polity, and religion are emphasized as a key process unfolding in this region.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on the intersections of geography, religion, and politics. A plethora of deities, drawn from local and supralocal sources, constructed a dynamic world of meaning and action that sponsored the religious life of individual families and communities. Ruling elites, which included both large states (such as Chamba, Kulu, Mandi, Kangra, Bashahr, Kahlur, and Simur) and petty chieftaincies or *thākūrāīs* (such as Keonthal, Kumharsain, and Jubal), drew their loyal clients and detractors from these communities as they coproduced a landscape energized by a shifting hierarchy of territorially defined divinities, folk cults, dominant and competing social groups, and political formations. Singh argues that this rich history continues to be preserved in the memories of the populace in the region, persisting until today.

The next six chapters cover an assortment of themes that focus on the intersections of pastoralism, peasant communities, trade, colonialism, and the state. Chapter 12 focuses on the practice of polyandry, inheritance, and land ownership, while chapter 14 discusses urban growth. Singh contends that peasant rebellions/protests (*dam*)

in the region were expressions of subaltern consciousness that were shaped by environmental and religious forces (chapter 7). The agro-pastoral world of the Western Himalayas fueled the exchange of commodities, such as borax, wool, salt, cotton piece goods, food grains, tobacco, agricultural implements, and firearms, through a network that connected the region to Central Asia and Tibet (chapters 8 and, in comparison with Alpine Europe, chapter 10). Chapters 9, 11, and 13 examine the relationships between transhumant pastoral communities such as the Gaddis and the state. This was especially crucial during the colonial period when the extension of agriculture, the establishment of a new regime of entitlements of access to and control over natural resources, and laws rapidly eroded older mobile lifeways. Singh views all this in terms of the arrival of the European-inspired process of “modernity” that rubs against traditional notions of community, caste, and kinship—a tension that persists to this day. The author also discusses the practice of polyandry and polygynandry (a mix of polyandry and polygamy), attributing their emergence to a host of historical factors, the prominent one being the need for communities to manage their need for labor against the exactions of the state (chapter 12). The final chapter explores the role of administrative towns (such as the older political capitals like Kangra, Mandi, and Kulu) and colonial hill-stations (Simla) in the Western Himalayas. The onset of British rule fueled their growth, driven by strategic, administrative, and ethnomedical needs of the colonial state.

In *Himalayan Histories*, both specialists and non-specialists will find a helpful overview of the history and culture of the Western Himalayas covering roughly the past two hundred years. The book is a timely addition to the growing literature on transhumance pastoralism and the history of the Himalayas. These emerging histories when marbled into the broader history of the subcontinent will no doubt enrich our understanding of the regional flows and processes that have crisscrossed the boundaries of kingdoms, geographical regions, and nations. The human mobility, diverse patterns of resource use, and ecological dynamism so prevalent in this agro-pastoral world have played a significant role in the history of this region and even beyond.

Having noted that, some caveats are in order. The book needs a conclusion in order to give adequate closure to what might otherwise appear to be a disjointed collection of chapters and place them within the context of emerging research. Historiographic notes would have been helpful in placing the Western Himalayas within a larger context of writing and debate about regional and world histories of transhumance, long-distance trade, monastic orders, gender, and state formation (see Moran and Warner 2016). Where historiographical and theoretical references are made, the treatment is uneven. Therefore, while Singh provides a cursory noncommittal engagement with the ongoing debates about the status of regions such as Zomia, he appears more committed and uncritical when working with older Redfieldian notions of Little and Great Traditions or processes such as Brahmanization and Sanskritization (59), along with terms such as “modernity.” There is little critique of the tendency of these conceptions to homogenize and dichotomize or bring them into conversation with the ongoing work on human agency that has emerged in sociology and anthropology since then.

A larger question of method persists throughout the text. Take, for instance, the use of source materials for a study such as this. The reader would benefit from some sustained discussion on, for example, the use of oral traditions and temple records, to reconstruct the history of the region (Sharma 2009). Moreover, Singh’s dependence

on British colonial sources to upstream historically can end up glossing over some aspects of the region's history. For example, colonial anxieties about fixing territory through cartographic projects must have impacted the administrative geography of the region in addition to redirecting flows of taxes, tribute, and arrangements for land-tenure, all of which were embedded in questions of honor, authority, and symbolic rule. This respatialization of the Western Himalayas is a subject that calls for additional research. Given Singh's extensive work and expertise, he is uniquely qualified to comment on these matters. In the end, his historical reconstruction of the region takes on a synchronic form presenting a staid picture of the dynamics at work in the hill communities of Himachal Pradesh.

On a minor note, some editorial care could have ensured the use of gender-inclusive language (e.g., the use of terms such as "man" on pages 7, 13, 18, 24, 168), the use of calendrical conventions such as CE instead of AD (58), and observing stylistic consistency in the placement of periods and quotes (19–20). The reader would have benefited from the inclusion of titles of works in the footnotes, while the absence of maps is a serious drawback in this publication. Overall, Chetan Singh's *Himalayan Histories* is a welcome reminder that historians need to undertake a critical engagement with the Himalayan world if they are to gain a richer understanding of its long-standing linkages with the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

REFERENCES

- Moran, Arik, and Catherine Warner. 2016. "Introduction: Charting Himalayan Histories." *Himalaya* 35 (2): 32–40.
- Sharma, Mahesh. 2009. *Western Himalayan Temple Records: State, Pilgrimage, Ritual and Legality in Chamba*. Leiden: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004176935.i-400>

Bernardo Michael
Messiah College