

# Evolution And Role Of The Devi And Devta Institution In The Tribal Area Of Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

The devi/devta (God and Goddesses) institutions in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, represents a unique blend of cultural, religious, and social practices deeply rooted in the region's heritage. This paper explores the multifaceted dimensions of the devi/devta institution, focusing on its historical origins, ritualistic practices, and societal significance. Central to the devi/devta institution is the worship of local devi/devta known as Shu, who are revered as guardians and protectors of their respective territories. The devi/devta institution reflects the syncretic nature of religious beliefs in Kinnaur, incorporating elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous animistic traditions. As such, it serves as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation and adaptation, evolving over time while retaining its core spiritual essence. This Paper provides a glimpse into the rich fabric of the devi/devta institution in Kinnaur, offering insights into its historical significance, ritualistic practices, and enduring relevance in contemporary society.

**Keyword:** Cultural, Devi/Devta Institution, Indigenous, Religious, Ritualistic

## Introduction

*Devi/devta* institutions in the Western Himalayas are central, with deities residing in natural elements of stone chalet, tree, caves or shrines in each village and their abodes are located in alpine and sub- alpine ranges. Some are local and others are widely revered across the region referred as universal deity of Kinnaur (Sharma, 1976, pp. 222-23). In the western Himalayan region of Himachal Pradesh, scholars and ethnographers have often clubbed together *devi* institution with *devta* institutions, despite their distinct roles and identities. For instance Sharma (2015) classification of *Devi chandika* within the *devta* institution lacks logical coherence, as *chandika* is a Local *devi*, not a *devta* and *devi* institutions is not within the *devta* institution but a parallel institution itself. Himachal Pradesh hosts both *devta* and *devi* institutions, like *Lakshana devi* in Bharmour, *Hidimba devi* in Kullu, *Kamakhya devi* in Karsog, *Shulini devi* in Solan, *Bhangayani devi* in Sirmour, in tribal district of Kinnaur *Chandika devi*, *Usha devi*, and *Chanderalekha devi* (Sharma, 2015, pp. 114-16), thereby considered *devi* institutions<sup>1</sup> equivalent to the *devta* institution.

Nestled in the serene valleys of Kinnaur, each village boasts its unique *devi* and *devtas* (Local God and Goddesses) institution, referred to locally as "*Deyo*" or "*Shu*." These deities dwell in trees, mountain, stones, or statues, and some have dedicated shrines or large temples. These sacred sentinels are not just symbols of worship but integral to the community's daily life, serving as guides and protectors.

Kinnaur's geographical isolation has preserved its indigenous practices, blending ancient local beliefs with mainstream Hinduism and Buddhism. The *devta* institution is deeply embedded in the daily lives of the people. There are two primary types of *devi/devtas* here: those represented by symbolic idols kept within temple sanctums and worshipped by priests, and those carried in *Jbaan* (palanquins) during processions, interacting with devotees through signs and their appointed *grokch* (oracles/ *gur*). For instance, the revered deities of Sungra village's Maheshwar *devta*, Kothi village's *devi* Chandika, and Kamru village's Badrinath *devta* are central to local worship. It is believed that during the Bushahr kingdom era, gold and silver from the royal treasury were used to craft these idols. In the cultural narrative of Kinnaur, the progeny of Banasur and Hirman *devi* hold significant hierarchical positions. According to Kinnauri folklore, they are depicted as having eighteen siblings, though some songs mention their number as seven (Sanskrityan, 1948, p. 197). These deities, such as Badrinath, Maheshwar, and *devi* Chandika, hold the highest hierarchical positions and oversee various aspects of village life, from agricultural practices to judicial decisions. Additionally, Buddhist *devi/devtas* such as Dabla *devta* of Kanam village and Mathi *devi* of Chitkul village also play significant roles. Other notable *devi/devtas* include Piri Nag *devta* of Sapni, Duling Nag *devta* of Brua, Kuldev Narayan Garshu, Grange Nag Nichar, and Teras *devta* of Rupi village, each contributing to the religious fabric of Kinnaur. Sharma (1976), categorizes Kinnaur's *devi/devtas* into Maheshwar *devi/devtas*, Nag, Nagin, *devi/devtas* (Serpent God Goddess),

<sup>1</sup> In the western Himalayan region of Kinnaur Himachal Pradesh, *devi* institutions are parallel to *devta* institutions. *devi* institutions represent the supreme female goddess of the village or a cluster of villages, similar to *devta* institutions.

Kul *devi/ devta* (Deity of a particular clan), Grih *devi/ devtas* (Deity within a home), *Sawani* (God or Goddess of the top of the Hill), and Buddhist deities.

Local legends further enrich this institution. For example, Piri Nag *devta*'s tale recounts how he eradicated corrupt Landlord and Thakurs in Sapni village, an event commemorated annually with the grand *Jaagang* (Night vigil of Piri Nag *devta*) festival. These *devi/ devtas* are believed to have meditated in nature, venerating water, forests, and mountains before being revered as divine beings. Relationships among *devi/ devtas* often mirror human relationships; for instance, Sungra's Maheshwar *devta* is considered the maternal uncle of Piri Nag *devta*, while *devi* Chandika is seen as the sister of Chagaon's Maheshwar *devta*. These relationships illustrate the familial and cultural connections among various deities in the region, highlighting the intricate religious fabric of Kinnaur.

In tribal region of Kinnaur, no significant event begins without seeking the blessings and approval of the local *devi/ devta*. The *devi/ devtas* are ever-present in the lives of the Kinnaura, providing solace in times of distress, resolving disputes, and safeguarding the environment, with much of the village land dedicated to these *devi/ devtas*. Festivals and fairs are grand celebrations in honor of these divine protectors, starting and ending with their rituals and blessings (Census of India, 1961). Thus, the institution of *devi/ devtas* holds profound importance among followers of both Hinduism and Buddhism in Kinnaur, where local customs and devotional practices from both traditions mutually influence each other. Additionally, Buddhist *Lamas* and *Jomos* (Religious teacher) also participate in the worship of these *devi/ devtas*, showcasing the region's cultural and religious diversity. As it clear from above incepts that *devi/ devta* plays determining role in the daily life of the Kinnaura tribe people, it provides a significant room to know that how this fascinating tradition evolved and what role do these deities play in the lives of Kinnaura tribal people. This research paper addresses the evolution of *devi/ devta* institutions and its role in daily life of the Kinnaura tribe.

### Methodology

This descriptive primary study is based on qualitative and quantitative data which is obtained by using stratified sampling from selected respondent from the study area by using open-ended and closed- ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, along with participation in social activities like fairs, festivals, socio-religious celebrations and close observation of (*Dumsa*) *Dev sabha* and meetings with key respondents. Secondary sources such as books, journals, and gazetteers have also been explored to obtain requisite information.

### Demographic Profile of Kinnaur

Kinnaur district in eastern Himachal Pradesh is a hilly area with small, deep valleys. It covers 6401 square kilometers, about 11.5 percent of the state. Located between 31° 06' and 32° 06' N latitudes and 77° 45' and 79° 00' E longitudes (GOI, MSEM, p. 1), it borders Lahaul & Spiti to the north, Kullu to the northwest, Shimla to the southwest, Uttarakhand to the south, and China (Tibet) to the east. As per the data of 2011 census, the district has five tehsils (Nihar, Kalpa, Sangla, Pooh, and Moorang) and two sub-tehsils (Hangrang, Tapri). Recong Peo, in Kalpa tehsil, is the district headquarters. There are three Community Development Blocks, 660 villages (234 inhabited, 426 uninhabited), and 73 panchayats in the district.

Demographic Profile of Kinnaur District	
<b>Total</b>	
<b>Total population</b>	84,121
<b>Scheduled Tribe population</b>	48,746
<b>Scheduled Caste population</b>	14,750
<b>Literacy Rate</b>	80.77
<b>Sex Ratio</b>	819
<b>Main workers: Agriculture/ Horticulture / Household industry</b>	56,273
<b>Development Block: Kalpa/ Nihar/ Pooh</b>	3
<b>Panchayat</b>	73
<b>Religion: -</b>	
<b>Hindu</b>	64732
<b>Buddhist</b>	18086
<b>Other</b>	1303

Source: Census 2011

As per the data of 2011 census the religious composition of Kinnaur district, reveals a predominantly Hindu population of approximately 77 percent, with Buddhism being practiced by about 21.5 percent of the inhabitants. This distribution varies significantly across different blocks within the district. For instance, Pooh Block has higher concentration of Buddhists, likely influenced by its geographical proximity to Tibet. In contrast, Kalpa Block exhibits a intermixing of religious landscape, where both Hinduism and Buddhism coexist, though Hinduism holds a stronger presence. Nihar Block, conversely, shows a clear majority of Hindus, with a minority following the Buddhist faith. These demographic insights underscore the diverse religious fabric of Kinnaur district, shaped by local and regional factors. Each village worships its own local deity, known as *Shu* or *Deyo*. Interestingly, both religions in the region share similar traditions in worshipping these *devi/ devtas*. Every village's *devi/ devta* has a palanquin (*Jbaan*), and its design is also similar, which plays a crucial role in their cultural and religious practices. The primary occupation of the people is agriculture. Apple cultivation has obtained worldwide recognition for its crisp flavors and durability.

### ***Devi/Devta Institution in Kinnaur: Genesis and Evolution***

Broadly, the history of Kinnaur is divided into three periods: Pre-Aryan period, Pre-Bhot period and Bhot period (Mamgain, 1971, p. 51); and with the evolution of Kinnaur, there was also evolution of local deities simultaneously. The institution of *devi/devta* in Kinnaur is deeply intertwined with the region's cultural and religious history. The roots of the *devi/devta* institutions in Kinnaur district can be witnessed from pre-historic and ancient time. The earliest inhabitants of Kinnaur, like many ancient communities, practiced animism and worshiped natural elements such as rivers, mountains, and trees (Sanan & Swadi, 1998, p. 41). This laid the groundwork for the later, more organized *devi/devta* worship. During the ancient time even before the advent of Buddhism, the Bon/ Bonpos religion,<sup>2</sup> also emphasizes the worship of nature spirits and local deities, was prevalent in the region (Sanan & Swadi, 1998, pp. 41-42). Later on, this influenced the local traditions and contributed to the formation of the *devi/devtas* institution. Over time, Hinduism and Buddhism began to permeate Kinnaur, leading to a syncretism where local deities (*devi/devtas*) were integrated with Hindu and Buddhist (*devi/devtas*). The roots of the Hindu *devi/devtas* of the regions can be seen in the form of Maheshwer *devta* in Sungra village, *devi* Chitrekha in tranda village and *devi* Usha/ Ukha in Nichar village etc. And the roots of Buddhist (*devi/devtas*) can be seen in the *devta* Dabla Shu in kanam village and *devi* Mathi in chitkul Chitkul village etc. of Kinnaur district. Furthermore, historical records Kinnaur Gazetteer 1971 also suggest that the Kinnauri kings and chieftains played a crucial role in institutionalizing *devi/devta* worship. They often acted as intermediaries between the *devi/devtas* and the people, further solidifying the *devi/devta* institution's social and political significance. The Kinnaur Gazetteers 1971 mentioned extensive documentation of *cheronings*<sup>3</sup> offers invaluable insights into Kinnaur's spiritual heritage. Among these, the *Cheronig* uttered by the *grokch* (oracle/*gur*) of Badri Nath at Kamru holds particular significance, tracing the lineage of rulers from the mythical figure Dev Purna. According to the *Cheronig*, Dev Purna embarked on a conquest, during ancient period, starting from Kamru, where he vanquished the ruling Thakur and expanded his dominion to neighbouring villages like Sangla and Tangling. His campaign culminated in Chini, near present-day Kalpa, where he overthrew the Thakur and confiscated his fort (Mamgain, 1971, p. 53). With each victory, Dev Purna solidified his authority, eventually reaching Sarahan, where he engaged in a decisive battle against the ruling chief, Banasur, emerging victorious. The churning further recounts Dev Purna's association with Kashi Nagar, possibly present-day Varanasi, where he brought back a man named Pradyuman from the Handervanshi dynasty, installing him as the king of Sarahan. These narratives, though steeped in mythology, offer glimpses into Kinnaur's historical realities, blending legend with historical events. Dev Purna's exploits, intertwined with the establishment of ruling dynasties, illustrate the intricate interplay between myth and history in shaping the region's identity. Over time, figures like Dev Purna transcended mortal realms, becoming revered deities themselves, immortalized in the collective consciousness of Kinnaur's inhabitants (Mamgain, 1971, pp. 53-54).

During the medieval period, the *devi/devta* institutions became more organized with established temples, rituals, and priesthood. Historical texts and inscriptions from this period especially Kinnaur Gazetteers 1971 provide evidence of temple constructions<sup>4</sup> and donations by local rulers and communities. The British administration documented various aspects of Kinnaur's cultural and religious practices, providing a wealth of information on the *devi/devta* institution. These records highlight the continued importance and evolution of *devi/devta* worship during the colonial period (Gerard, 1841, p. 2). Basically, much of the historical evidence for the *devi/devta* institution in Kinnaur comes from oral traditions, folklore, and local legends passed down through generations. These stories often depict the origins, powers, and miracles of the *devi/devtas*, reinforcing their significance in Kinnauri society. The numerous rituals and festivals dedicated to the *devi/devtas* serve as living evidence of the institution's historical roots. These practices often include ancient elements that reflect the long history of *devi/devta* worship in the region.

During the field study, one of the respondent,<sup>5</sup> Ram Dasi<sup>6</sup> (80 years old) from Sapni village told the history of Piri Nag *devta* in the form of a folk song such as:

*"Soti jugye dharyoden bruaang dhayroden bruaang dhunkaru ghorey... Zetbi bhuley shadeo pandit, machki byuley gopal Chand Thakur, Kanchi byuley zji sdiyasarf (Piri nag)"*.

The above song depicts the origin of a divine snake deity in the village of Sapni. In which Tunki Banthin (name of a young girl), married in the Dungsar dynasty in Brua village, was given a basket filled with mud and snake offspring by her father to mitigate the water scarcity of the area. Upon returning home, she opened the basket in the cow shed, releasing the snakes who replenished the ground floor with water. Due to Dudhi's actions, fearing her home would be submerged, she cut the serpent deities and threw them in Chispandarng (name of a stream which flow in between Brua and Sapni), where they united to form a giant snake that settled in the Duling Lake, giving rise to the Nag traditions (snake worshipping) and worship of Sapni village.

<sup>2</sup> The Bon religion is an ancient Tibetan spiritual tradition, predating Buddhism, that includes shamanistic practices, rituals, and meditation aimed at interacting with deities and spirits.

<sup>3</sup> In the state of *Cheroin* transcendence, when an oracle's (*Grokch*) body vibrates it becomes the dwelling place of a *devi/devta*, every utterance is deemed a divine decree. During this oracular session the oracle used to talk in the local dialects of the respective region of Upper, lower and middle region of Kinnaur, which is further decoded by the core executive affairs managing committees of the deity in case of any ambiguity and confusion.

<sup>4</sup> The architectural style of Kinnaur's temples is a mix of pagoda style and closed roofs, and they are built with intricate wood and stone carvings.

<sup>5</sup> All interview were recorded Hindi and locale dialect during the field survey later on researcher translated these into English.

<sup>6</sup> All names have been changed to maintain anonymity

Another respondent, Hirpal Singh (71 years old) from Kanam village explained the history of Dabla Shu *devta* in Kanam Village:

"The history of Dabla *Shu devta* is intertwined with a tale that originates from Tibet, involving Dabla *Shu* and his nine siblings. Their story unfolds through personal journeys that lead them to Kinnaur, where they faced challenges such as battling a demon *Tiyakhampa* (Yak look like a demon), at *Yaksharpu* cave and overcoming various trials. Through their efforts, they established deities in several villages, including Kanam. Their significant victory at *Yakshpu* and the subsequent establishment of the deity in Kanam resonate deeply within local narratives and ancient Buddhist texts. It's important to note that this deity is a Buddhist figure."

Another respondent, Gulab Dasi (80 years old) from Sungra village told the history of *devi* Chandika Brother and Sisters in the form of a folk song such as:-

"*Yuchala den hirma debini, ring ring banna moleyutu danyode.....Thochala shong bhanasur Deo,..Gorboring aago gurbin bachis hirma devi, jormes devi chandika, Danchlale jormes bhai Mehshur*".

The above song tells of Banasura's forceful marriage to HIRAMA at Molotdhar. After this, they bear 18 children at *Gobaring Agg* in Sungra village. Chandika was the eldest to all. Chandika divided the Kinnaur region among the siblings, keeping the most fertile area under her braids. Inspired by Chandika's cleverness and Mahasur's bravery, they establish divine rule, shaping Kinnaur's cultural landscape. These tales enrich the region's heritage with valour, strategic wisdom, and enduring justice.

Scholars and ethnographers such as Loyd Gerard (1841), Rahul Sanskrityan (1948), Bansi Ram Sharma (1976), Moul Ram Thakur (1981), B. R. Sharma (2015) etc. have done few studies on the *devi/devta* institution of Kinnaur, documenting the historical development and current practices. These studies provide critical insights into how the institution has evolved over time. According to the British scholar Gerard (1841), in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Kinnaur, earlier known as Kinner or Kunawar, was divided into '*sat kboond*' (seven regions), each ruled by its own *devi/devta*. However, the process of fragmentation did not cease there; instead, it intensified, giving rise to many small power enclaves constantly engaged in territorial conflicts and strategic alliances. Even neighbouring Bhots, sensing opportunity amidst the chaos, joined the fray, further destabilizing the region. To fortify themselves against external threats and assert their dominance, Thakurais constructed forts at top commanding sites. Today, remnants of these structures, such as the Labrang, Morang, Sapni and Kamru villages forts, stand as silent witnesses to Kinnaur's unrestrained past, echoing tales of conquests and struggles for supremacy (Mamgain, 1971, p. 53). In these places we can find the symbols of local deities at present time too. Archaeological evidence, such as ancient temples, idols, and inscriptions, supports the historical existence and evolution of the *devi/devta* institution in Kinnaur.

Over time, as societal structures became more organized, certain *devi/devtas* gained prominence as primary guardians and arbiters of justice within their respective territories. The incorporation of Hindu and Buddhist influences likely occurred through interactions with neighboring regions and through trade routes traversing the Himalayas. Hindu *devi/devtas* like Maheshwar *devta* and *devi* Chandika became integral to the *devta* institution, coexisting alongside indigenous gods and goddesses (Sharma, 1976, p. 222). The inclusion of Dabla *Shu*, a Buddhist deity revered in Kanam village, emphasize the cultural diversity within Kinnaur and the region's openness to religious syncretism. Dabla *Shu's* prominence in upper Kinnaur reflects the historical interactions between Buddhism and traditional Kinnauri beliefs, influenced by Lamaism. Devotees across the region seek Dabla Shu's blessings for various aspects of life, showcasing the enduring relevance of traditional and Buddhist spiritual practices in Kinnaur's societal fabric (Sanskrityan, 1948, pp. 153-54). This integration of diverse religious influences, including Lamaism, enriches the *devi/devta* institution, highlighting its adaptability and evolution over time to accommodate changing cultural dynamics.

In recent years, alongside the established deity institutions, new *devta* institutions have emerged in Kinnaur, reflecting evolving societal dynamics. A notable example is that of deities representing of the scheduled castes people, such as Seshnag in Chaura village, and Kuldeo Narayan in Chota Kamba and Kachrang villages. These *devtas* were traditionally not part of the mainstream *devta* hierarchy and lacked elaborate processions or chariots. However, with economic prosperity reaching the *devta* institutions, there has been a notable shift. These *devtas* now have their own palanquins, symbolizing their growing prominence and recognition within Kinnaur's religious landscape. This trend indicates a broader trend of inclusivity and economic empowerment within Kinnaur's *devi/devta* institutions, marking a significant development in recent years. Every deity is revered through specific customs and traditions, with festivals and celebrations dedicated to their namesake (Sharma, 1976, p. 158). These festivals are deeply intertwined with the local community's identity and serve as occasions for communal bonding, religious fervor, and cultural expression. From the sacred chants and processions to the vibrant dances and offerings, each *devi/devtas* presence is felt throughout Kinnaur, shaping the lives and beliefs of its inhabitants.

The hierarchical structure within the institution may have developed gradually, with the emergence of *grokch* as intermediaries between the human and divine realms. These local priests played a crucial role in organizing rituals, interpreting divine will, and mediating between the community and the deities. As Kinnaur became more integrated into broader political and economic networks, the *devi/devta* institution may have adapted to changing circumstances. Temples and monasteries dedicated to various deities were constructed, serving as centers of religious and cultural activity within the region.

### Key Functionaries of *Devi & Devta* Institutions

The institution of *devi/devtas* in the Western Himalayan region, particularly in Kinnaur, represents a vital aspect of community life and governance. This institution integrates various facets of daily village life, underpinned by a deeply interconnected relationship between the community and the deities, who actively participate in communal affairs. This symbiotic relationship enhances the deities' influence beyond religious ceremonies, shaping the socio-political dynamics of the district (Das, 2011, pp. 10-11). Villagers collectively invest their time and resources in activities centered on the deities,



relying on them for guidance and support in navigating the broader socio-political landscape. Moreover, community members themselves serve as primary custodians of rituals performed at the *devi/devta*' abodes, thereby preserving cultural heritage and spiritual practices essential to their identity. This mutual engagement fosters social cohesion and reinforces traditional values, ensuring continuity across generations and contributing significantly to the region's rich cultural heritage and societal harmony. The *devi/devta* institution in Kinnaur, is integral to local religious and cultural practices. Each village typically venerates its own *devi/devta* (God/Goddesses), with associated rituals and festivals. Individuals called '*Kardaars*' or '*Shu Khomling*'<sup>7</sup> are chosen by the *devi/devta* to serve for specific or indefinite periods, overseeing temple care and ritual observance. This position is hereditary, passed down among the men of the same family. If there is no male heir in the family, the *devi/devta* itself will appoint a new '*kardar*' (Deities caretakers).

During the field work, many of the core executive members of *devi/devta* institution at that time such as Chander Gyan (Kamdar of Piri Nag *devta* of Sapni village) and Hirpal (*grokch* (oracle) of Pando *devta* of Kanam village) responded that: "In Kinnaura society, the village *devi/devta* holds the highest position. The main functionaries in the region's *devi/devta* institutions are *Mohatmin*, *Grokch*, *Kardaar/Shumathes*, *Pujari*, *Kaayth*, *Bhandari*, *Kotwal/Talangsyra*, *Shucharas/Holmondi*, *Chalmiya* and *Baskisa/Bajantri*, who fulfill different roles according to their positions and contribute to the orderly management of religious and judicial matters."

According to them the main functionaries and their functions are following:

Functionaries of <i>devi/devta</i> Institution	Role and Functions
<b>Mohatamim</b> (care taker)	<i>Mohatamim</i> looks after the overall management of the temple affairs and the land of the deity. In government documents the land and other property of the deity is documented in the name of the <i>Mohatamim</i> of the temple <sup>8</sup> . He is the Chief <i>kardaar</i> (care taker) of the main <i>devi/devta</i> temple.
<b>Grokch</b> (Narrative Keeper)	Serves as the deity's mouthpiece, communicating the <i>devi/devtas</i> will to the people. Also shares mythological and historical lore during <i>Cheroning</i> (In 'Trans situation when he used to talk directly to the <i>devi/devta</i> during oracular session) festivals. Its appointment is hereditary, but some places now includes individuals from various lineages, as seen in Sapni village with the Boturi <i>pujari</i> clan.
<b>Pujari</b> : (Worshipper)	Performs daily worship, including offering incense. <i>Pujari</i> cannot consume garlic, chicken, or eggs but can eat sacrificed goat and ram's mutton and wine. From fixed clans (e.g., Yotko, Deryan, and Poojari clans in Sapni village).
<b>Shumaathes/ Kamdar</b> : (Community Representative)	Represents community issues to the <i>devi/devta</i> . This is hereditary Post: Typically from specific clans (e.g., Loktus and Bisht clans in Kanam village).
<b>Bandari/ Khajanchi</b> (Treasury Manager)	Manages the <i>devi/devtas</i> agricultural resources and granary. The key to the deity granary store ( <i>Kuthar/ urch</i> ) remains with this person. This post is from specific clans (e.g., Bhandaari and Prani clans in Sapni village).
<b>Kaithr</b> : (Accountant)	Manages <i>devi/devtas</i> accounts and keeps records of temple decisions. This is also majorly hereditary post held by specific clans (e.g., Manapang clan in Kothi village).
<b>Kotwal</b> : (Temple Caretaker)	Maintains temple cleanliness. These are appointed yearly by the deity. This post may be held by any male or female.
<b>Shucharas/Holmondi</b> : (Messengers)	Acts as messengers for the <i>devi/devta</i> . Appointed typically from specific clans, varying by village (e.g., Gorobsai clan in Sapni village).
<b>Bajantri</b> :	Musicians who provide ceremonial music during religious events and festivities. Like such as the <i>Dhol</i> (drum), <i>Bana</i> (bronze trumpet), <i>Baam</i> <sup>9</sup> (big drum), <i>Bugjaal</i> (Two copper plates) and other percussion instruments. In most villages, the " <i>bajantri</i> " are typically blacksmiths.
<b>Chalmiya/ Paltruks</b> : (Bearer)	Carries the <i>devi/devta</i> on shoulders during processions and dances. Villagers are divided into groups, rotating annually (e.g., Kanai, Baturi, and Sapni in Sapni village).
<b>Dumsa</b> : (Dev Sabha)	Traditional village parliament which includes all members of a village, makes and abolishes village customary laws. Its meetings held annually, such as in Sungra village this meeting takes place on 18 <sup>th</sup> day of <i>Basha</i> which falls in the month of May every year.

<sup>7</sup> Shoo *Khomling* is a term comprising two words: 'Shoo' meaning 'Deity' and '*Khomling*' meaning 'council.' Therefore, Shoo *Khomling* stands for the 'Council of *devi/devta*,' where different local people are represented. *devi/devtas* appoint their representatives, known as *Kardaars*, every year in April. These representatives are often appointed on a hereditary basis by the local *devi/devta*.

<sup>8</sup> In Kinnaur, *devi/devtas* are classified as 'muafidar' (tax-exempt land) or 'gair-muafidar' (no land records). The land of *devi/devta* is recorded in government records under the name of the *devi/devtas* '*Mohatamim*' (caretaker).

<sup>9</sup> *Baam*, (big kettle drum) also known as the "*bada nagara*," is a sacred and revered symbol of *devi/devta*, which one person carries on their back before the *devi/devta* procession. Without it, the *devi/devta* does not leave the temple premises. Traditionally, it is carried by a specific member of the lower caste community appointed by the *devi/devta*. The *Baam* is made from the skin of a cow, which has led to controversies in many villages of Kinnaur. Now, many lower caste families are refusing to carry it, leading temple committees in most villages of Kinnaur to hire someone willing to carry the *Baam* by paying them.

In the village structure, the hierarchy is led by the Devi/Devta at the top, followed by the Mohatamim, Grokch, Kamdar, Pujari, Kaith, Bandari, Kotwal, Shucharas/Holmondi, Chalmiya/Paltruks, Bajantri, and finally, the general public at the bottom.

The *devi/devta* institution in the Kinnaur district is characterized by functionaries appointed by the *devi/devta* and associated with specific families or lineages, ensuring continuity and tradition as roles are inherited through generations. This executive committee manages the *devi/devtas* affairs and functions as a judiciary, resolving disputes among devotees through the *devi/devtas* arbitration. Das (2011) notes that in western Himalaya region in Kinnaur *devtas* play a vital role in resolving familial and marital disputes, fostering reconciliation, and providing psychological support during illness, offering solace and strength during challenging times.

#### Classification of associated *Devi/Devtas* according to the Mainstream Religions

Associated (incarnation) with Shaivism	Associated (incarnation) with Vaishnava	Associated (incarnation) with Buddhism	Primitive Ethnic Deities
Maheshwar siblings, and Nag, Nagin <i>Devi/Devta</i>	Badri Vishal and Narenus (Narayan Vishnu) <i>Devta</i>	Dabla Shu siblings, <i>Devi Mathi</i> and other upper Kinnaur region <i>devi/devta</i>	Savni <i>Devi</i> (Hill top Goddesses), God of Harvesting, God of Male Sacrifices

In Kalpa and Nichar blocks, there are diverse *devi/devta* traditions rooted in Shaivism, such as the Maheshwar siblings' *devi/devtas* and various Nag and Nagin *devi/devtas*. Conversely, the Badri Vishal *devta* in Kamru village and others across the Kinnaur region, like Narenus *devta*, are associated with Vaishnavism. In the Pooh block, the Dabla siblings and other goddesses adhere to Buddhist beliefs. Additionally, in Kalpa block, *devi Mathi* is revered in the Buddhist tradition. Kinnaur also hosts several deities revered in both Hindu and Buddhist faiths, such as Kasuraj *devta* in Ribba village. This cultural diversity and harmony highlight Kinnaur's unique religious heritage.

#### Communicating with *Devi* and *Devta*

In Kinnaur, there are two ways to communicate with the *devi/devtas*: firstly through symbolic gestures with *devi/devtas* palanquin, where the *devi/devta* responds with gestures indicating "Yes" or "No", or secondly direct urging the oracle of *devi/devta* by the pleader. Rahul Sanskrityan noted that Kinnauri *devi/devta* are not solely dependent on *grokch*; even in the absence of *grokch*, they communicate through signs and gestures (Sanskrityan, 1948, p. 163). For example nodding the head from side to side means "No" nodding towards the questioner means "yes", jumping up and down indicates great delight, and turning their head away from the questioner signifies disinterest or dismissal. These gestures reflect their nuanced communication and interaction with devotees. If during these gestures a devotee doesn't understand, the *devi/devta* often communicates through their *grokch*. The *grokch* serves as a medium of dialogue and provides explanations between them and the devotees. Through this issue solving approach the *devi/devta* work as a Kangaroo court which deliver speedy justice to the people without any monetary expenses.

#### *Jbaan* (Palanquin of *Devi* and *Devtas*)

The deity or *devi* of a village in Kinnaur has a palanquin called a '*Jbaan*' or '*Rathang*'. This palanquin is made of wood and covered with fine cotton or silk cloth. It is decorated with metal faces, usually made of silver or gold, and the head is adorned with dark-red yak tail hair. Two long poles are attached to the sides, allowing the palanquin to be moved up and down. Two men carry it, one at the front and one at the back. There is no difference in the way a deity and a *devi* are made. *devis* have nose rings on their front face, called '*shir mukhang*' (Sharma, 1976, p. 215). While each item used in the palanquin is sacred on its own, together they symbolize the deity (Barty, 2004, p. 87). The "divine presence" of the deity is conveyed through these components and is made accessible through community efforts and donations (Barty, 2004, p. 87). In Kinnaur once decorated, the *Rath* is lifted by two bearers, with additional people standing on it to balance it. Although it is believed to be moved only by divine power, the palanquin allows the deity or *devi* to personally inspect their territory, meet devotees, visit other deities, offer greetings, and perform dances, bathe, and express emotions like anger or happiness (Sharma, 1976, pp. 258-59). And *jbaan* responds to questions through its forward and backward movements, using symbolic gestures (Sanskrityan, 1948, p. 163).

Luchesi (2006) argued that deities often protect the rights of villagers. For example, the Maheshwar *devta* in Kinnaur influenced several villages- Chagaon, Urni, Yulla, Meeru, Punang, and Choling- to oppose Jaypee Company's Karcham Hydro Corporation's tunnel construction for a hydroelectric project due to environmental and social concerns. Following the *devta*'s invocation, villagers protested against the hydroelectric project with the *devta*'s *Rath*. This was also noted by 'Down to Earth' (2006) in its article 'Villagers in Himachal block hydel project,' which mentioned how the tribal community in Kinnaur sought protection from their deities. The *Rath* represents the deity's "physical presence" and serves as a tool for expressing the deity's "regional sovereignty" (Helperin, 2016, p. 302). This practice underscores the deep connection between local beliefs, environmental activism, and indigenous rights.

In Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh, a village typically doesn't have just one deity or *devi* with a palanquin; some villages have two or more. Other deities and *devis* in the village might not have chariots. Some have a full body, some only a face, and others no form at all. These deities are under the main village deity and act as helpers or advisors. In most of villages in

kinnaur, lower caste communities like Kolis and Lohars do not touch these deities. For instance, in Sungra village Maheshwar deity is not touched by these groups. When a child is born or someone dies in the family, the deities or *Devīs* are not touched for eight to thirteen days. If untouchables touch them, they are considered polluted, and a sheep or goat is sacrificed to remove the pollution.

### Grokch (Oracle/ Gur)

The main sources to talk and communicate with *devi/devta* is through *grokch* and he is the sole channel to know the wish and heart felt desires of deity. One of the key respondent, Laxman Cherring of Sapni village who is also *Kardar* of *devta* "Narayanvishnu" revealed that:

"When the palanquin is placed on the ground or the *chalamiya* carries it on own shoulders, the '*grokch*' speaks to the villagers on behalf of the deity. He shakes his head until his cap falls down, which is caught by the chief priest. To confirm the message, he places mustard seeds in the palm of the *kamdar*- odd numbers confirm it, while even numbers require the process to be repeated."

Laxman Cherring asserts that the oracle plays a crucial role in facilitating communication between the *devi/devta* and villagers during the palanquin procession and while the *devi/devtas* chariot is grounded. The rituals of oracle appointment is widely documented by Molu Ram Thakur (1997), Surat Thakur (2013; 2004), and Ehud Helperin (2020) in Kullu- Manali valley. The same type's rituals web is followed and practised in tribal district of Kinnaur, the presence of the deity is effectively affirmed through the *grokch* (oracle), emphasizing the *devi/devta* vigilant stare over the actions of their believers. Additionally, this segment show the significance and appreciation of the *grokch* as a local judicial authority, as highlighted with Berti, who draws similar between the role of the *gur* and that of a judge within the state's judicial framework (Berti. 2015, p. 20). Authors like Rahul Sanskrityan (1948), Sharma (1976), and others provide comprehensive insights into the duties and rituals associated with the *grokch* in Kinnaur. According to Sharma, the *grokch* holds 'supreme authority', wielding the voice of the *devi/devta* and possessing knowledge of secret mantras (Sharma, 1976, p. 218). Sharma further asserts that the influence of a *grokch* 'surpasses that of the village headman and other officials of any status' (Sharma, 1976, p. 217). This elevated status of the *grokch/gur* as a prominent member of the community aligns with the popular understanding that the term '*gur*' extracts from '*guru*', meaning religious teacher (Sharabi, 2019, p. 3). As Thakur aptly puts it, the *gur* holds 'virtual monopoly in interpreting the will of the *devta*' (Thakur, 1997, p. 136). In Kinnaur, the *devi/devta* express their thoughts and wishes through signs, but they speak through the mouth of a medium (*grokch*) (Sanskrityan, 1948, p. 60). Therefore, the *grokch* serves as a crucial medium for directly conveying the authority of the *devi/devta* and demonstrating the extent of the *devi/devtas* control over various circumstances (Sharma, 1976, pp. 217-18).

As per the Kinnaur Gazetteer (1971), the "*grokch*" is a medium who articulates the desires of local *devi/devta* during their ceremonies and other religious festivals, playing a significant role in the community's social and religious life. In additionally, when speaking on behalf of the *devi/devta*, the oracle communicates in the local language of the region and uses the first-person singular, portraying the *devi/devtas* a personal actor engaged in dialogue with their followers (Sanskrityan, 1948, p. 60).

### Role of *Devi/devta* as a chief Courtier

In tribal district of Kinnaur *devi/devta*, as a chief courter, plays a pivotal role in mediating between the divine and human realms, ensuring harmony. During the field work, one of the respondent Leela Devi who was of around 45 years of age explained on own word how the institution of *devta* delivers justice:-

"In 1989 after my marriage, my husband Bhagat Singh left me to marry a woman from a higher caste. I asked Maheshwar *Devta* for justice. The *devta* summoned him and decided that I wouldn't be happy with Bhagat Singh. The *devta* ordered him to pay a fine of Rs 20,000 and return the gold and silver. Bhagat Singh followed the order."

Leela Devi's assertion regarding how *devta* Maheshwar administers justice in Sungra village is a testament to the deep-rooted traditions and effective governance systems found in tribal district of kinnaur Himachal Pradesh. Many authors and ethnographers who conducted studies in Himachal Pradesh regarding deity institutions they all have found it that deity used to provide fast track and zero expanses justice to people at their doorsteps and people used to obey the command of that justice due to the fear of deity's anger and curse. Ethnographic study highlight the vital role of village deities like *devta* Jamlu in Malana village and *kul devtas* in Western Himalayan villages. According to Thakur (1997), Jamlu *devta* holds a significant role in the village of Malana. Jamlu *devta* has the authority to administer justice and impose punishments. Meanwhile, Sharma (1976) noted that in the Western Himalayan villages in kinnaur, every individual venerates a family deity, a *Lok devta* or *devi*, seeking their counsel on health, livelihood, family issues, and disputes. Both perspectives illuminate the significant contributions of these village deities to cultural, governance, and judicial roles, emphasizing their enduring impact on community cohesion and traditional justice systems in the region.

### Hierarchical structure and caste dynamics in the *Devi/Devta* Institution

The hierarchical structure within *devi/devta* Institution is anchored by the Supreme *devi/devta*, followed by the Mohtmin, *Gur*, *Pujari*, *Kamdar*, *Kayth*, *Bandari*, and *Bajantri*. Besides this *devi/devtas* are also according to caste line of the region. There is also practice of pollution and purity among the *devi/devtas*. Some *devi/devtas* are open and accessible to all while some have close scrutinized accessibility and hermit practices with the people of so called lower castes. Each role, from spiritual leadership to ceremonial support, contributes to the institution's spiritual integrity and community cohesion. Additionally, these roles are categorized according to their respective caste and specific lineage, determining the availability and priorities of positions based on the institution's unique social and religious framework. Jodhka (2015) noted that in Himachal Pradesh, *devtas* (Deities) plays a crucial role in maintaining social order and community unity, reinforcing traditional hierarchies through temple activities. Participation often aligns with social class and landownership, with *devatas* viewed as authoritative figures

whose disrespect can lead to misfortune. Temples, overseen by dominant castes, wield significant influence, intersecting with local governance. *devatas* uphold social norms, perpetuating caste-based inequalities. Similarly, in Kinnaur, caste dynamics influence the *devi/devta* institution, impacting individuals from various backgrounds. This connection highlights the entrenched traditional structures in the region, where temple activities, social classes, and landownership interact, influencing local governance and perpetuating caste-based inequalities. Thus, both in Himachal Pradesh and Kinnaur, *devi/devta* institutions shape and steer spiritual and social aspects, serving as mechanisms of control and cohesion within their communities. During the fieldwork, one of the respondent Chhoyum Mani (80 year old) replied that-

In our village, Koshia (upper caste) and Koli (lower caste) have separate temples. In the Koshia temple, the main functionaries are all from the upper caste, but lower caste people also help by playing the traditional musical instruments for the deity. In the Koli temple, the main functionaries are all from the lower caste, and no one from the upper caste is involved. In the upper caste temple, only upper caste individuals can carry the deity and dance during processions. Lower caste people are usually not allowed to enter the inner sanctum, touch the palanquin, or participate in the deity's procession, with few exceptions like our village the most prominent deity Piri Nag is lifted by Koli (Lower Caste) people while taking it out of the temple."

However, interestingly despite these restrictions in the temple of Upper caste, members of the Scheduled Caste community often crucial roles in various aspects of *devi/devta* worship. Contribute significantly to temple construction and maintenance, renovation, utilizing their skills in carpentry, masonry, and sculpture to create and preserve sacred structures. Additionally, lower-caste artisans are frequently involved in crafting essential items for *devi/devta* worship, such as the *devi/devta* palanquin, clothing, temple, idol, icon, musical instrument flute, drum and band etc. However, despite their integral contributions, lower-caste individuals are typically excluded after the final sanctification process, which often involves the sprinkling of holy water of Sutlej River or springs of *devi/devta*' annual bathing alpine and sub-alpine regions or cow urine by upper-caste individuals and priest. This exclusionary practice clearly states the entrenched social hierarchies within the *devi/devta* institution, perpetuating caste-based divisions despite the collaborative involvement of individuals from diverse backgrounds in religious activities.

#### **Rituals ceremony and Reverence *Devi/Devta* role in fair and festivals**

*Devi/devta* institutions play a pivotal role in society. Ethnographer Halperin (2020) extensively analyzed the multifaceted role of the Himalayan goddess Hadimba, illuminating her diverse functions and significance. Similarly, in the region of Kinnaur, other deities also exhibit multifaceted roles, reflecting the complex interplay between culture, tradition, and belief systems. At its core, the *devi/devta* institution revolves around the worship of deities, often represented by sacred palanquins or idols believed to embody divine power and protection. Culturally, the institution of *devi* and *devtas* fosters a sense of community and belonging among people of Kinnaur. Festivals and rituals dedicated to *devi/devtas* provide occasions for communal gatherings, strengthening social bonds and preserving cultural heritage. For instance, the *Fulyach* (flower extracting from alpine and sub-alpine destinations) festival, known as the "festivals of flowers" is celebrated across Kinnaur with enthusiastic participation from villagers, showcasing traditional *Kayang* (dances), *Bajgi* (music), and rite that underscore the region's rich cultural legacy.

On investigation regarding the role played by *Devi/Devta* institution during major occasion or cycle of life i.e. during Birth, Marriage, Death it was observed that all respondents were unanimous in saying that-

"When a baby boy is born, the family brings the *devi/devta*'s palanquin into their home for a special worship ceremony called '*Shukud*'.<sup>10</sup> This ritual involves prayers and offerings to ensure the newborn's well-being and longevity. During this individual worship of *Devi/devta* the head woman of the household use to perform welcome worship of the respective *devi/devta*. Male head of the household does not have this privilege to perform this welcome worship, its sole right of the head female to invite that *devi/devta* in the household."

It signifies the community's belief in the protective and benevolent powers of the *devi/devta* from the very beginning of the child's life. According to them:-

"Another significant ritual is the *Mundan Sanskar* (Tonsure ceremony), or the first haircut, which typically takes place when the child is two or three years old. This ceremony is important for both boys and girls. The family brings the *devi* or *devta*'s *Kalash* (sacred vessel) into the home, and amidst prayers and rituals, the child's hair is ceremonially cut".

This act symbolizes a new phase of life and spiritual purification, blessed by the *devta*'s presence. Moreover marriages in Kinnaura society also involve seeking the *devta*'s approval. Regarding this, respondents stated that-

"Before a marriage is finalized, the *devi/devta*'s consent is sought, emphasizing the belief that divine approval is essential for a harmonious and successful union. And at the time of marriage, the palanquin of the *devi/devta* is brought home and the *devi/devta* blesses the newly married couple".

This tradition ensures that the couple begins their married life with the *devi/devtas* blessings. Additionally the *devi/devtas* role extends to end-of-life rituals as well. According to respondents, during funeral time-

"During the funeral rites, the body is carried in a procession to the final cremation ground while playing traditional musical instruments associated with the *devi/devta*."

<sup>10</sup> In Kinnaur's cultural traditions, during auspicious occasions such as "*Shookud*," the village *devi/devta*'s palanquin or idols visit to the home of the landlord. Blessings are sought through rituals and prayers, which often entail offering to the entire village community. Typically, these rituals are conducted in the name of the son, symbolizing the continuation of lineage and familial duties, rather than in the name of a daughter. This custom reflects historical norms that prioritize male lineage and familial responsibilities.



This practice, which remains in a few villages, ensures that the *devi/devta*'s blessings accompany the deceased on their final journey, highlighting the *devi/devta*'s significance in not only in life but death as well.

Beyond these personal and familial rituals, the *devi/devta* plays a central role in various communal festivals and fairs. During these events, the *devi/devta* is worshipped at different sacred locations, such as forest sanctuaries and hilltop shrines. These ceremonies involve elaborate rituals and offerings to seek the *devi/devta*'s favour for good harvests, protection from natural calamities, and overall prosperity. The communal participation in these festivals strengthens social bonds and reaffirms the community's collective faith in the *devi/devta*'s power and benevolence.

The people of Kinnaur about that respondent have asked a question from respondents that their maximum fairs and festivals are celebrated in the name of their local *devi/devtas*. One of the respondent Hirpal (71 year old) from Kanam village elaborate it in his own words:-

"In Kinnaur district numerous fairs and festivals are celebrated throughout the year on different occasions. These festivals, are often celebrated in honour of local *devi/devtas*, including prominent Hindu events such as *Chetrol*, *Bishu*, *Faguli*, and *Sajob*, which mark different seasonal and agricultural milestones. In the Buddhist regions, significant festivals like *Losar* (Buddhist New Year), *Ramdes*, *Shirkan*, *Kangyur Jalma* and *Gompa Jalkha* are celebrated with great enthusiasm. *Fuhyach* (festival of flowers) is a unique festival in Kinnaur which celebrate by both Hindu and Buddhist communities. Additionally, *devi/devta* and ghosts-related festivals like *Maang Songab* (Festivals related to the departure of the God and Goddess), *Khepa*, *Chetrol* and *suskar* are also celebrated."

Kinnaur's fairs and festivals are integral to its culture and tradition, deeply involving *devi/devtas* in their celebrations. It would be incomplete to not discuss the major fairs and festivals where *devi/devtas* play a significant role. Some of them are as follows. In January, the Sazo festival marks the departure of *devi/devta* to Indralok, symbolized by opening their palanquins. In Kamru village, this festival also signifies the New Year, with special food prepared believed to last all year. In March, the Faguli festival honors *Sawni devi* (hill top goddesses) with week-long rituals, including the sacred journey of *devta* Piri Nag's Kalash (Sacred urn). In July, the Koshme- Shukud fair witnesses *devi* Chandika's palanquin journey from Kothi to Kalpa village, where devotees perform worship rituals, special dances, and offerings. The Ukhayang festival, celebrated from August to November, marks the bloom of wildflowers and honors nature and local *devi/devta* with flower garlands and ancestor worship. In December or January, Losar, the Tibetan New Year, includes roasted barley dishes, pine nut garlands, monastery mask dances, and the exchange of greetings like "*Losuma Tashi*" which means Happy New Year and seek blessings i.e. "*Losuma Shalkid* from elders." These festivals reflect Kinnaur's rich cultural diversity, reverence for deities and nature, and communal joy.

### **Economic Role of *Devi/Devta* in Kinnaur**

In Kinnaur, each deity has its own banking system through which people receive financial assistance during emergencies from the *devi/devtas* funds. In villages like Sapni, Kachrang, Sungra, Sangla, and others, every household is provided loans from the *devi/devtas* funds at lower interest rates for a year. And it's written record is maintained by the *devi/devtas Kaith* (Accountant). This system is known locally in Kinnauri as "*Rupya Bitye Baye Kornob*" or "*Rupya Kumo Bering Lanmo*". This implies the process of depositing and withdrawing money from the *devi/devtas* funds.

### **One of the key respondent Sujata (40 year old) from Sapni village said that:**

"Every year in Sapni village, the *devta* Institution, which includes Kanai, Baturi, and households of Sapni village, lends money to families in need at lower interest rate for one year, for purposes such as weddings, illness, or other expenses. This year, my family also borrowed twelve thousand rupees from the Piri Nag Temple."

According to Sujata assertion, every year in Sapni village, the deity institution lends money at an 8 percent interest rate for one year to needy families for purposes such as weddings, illnesses, or other needs.

Beside this, the deities also provide financial assistance during natural disasters. For instance, especially during times of COVID-19 pandemic, various *devi/devta* institutions in Kinnaur made significant economic contributions to the district relief fund as Piri Nag of Sapni and Devi Chandika in Kothi village contributed Rs. 51,115 and 51,000 respectively whereas *Dabla Shu* of Kanam contributed Rs. 5,00,000 (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2020). These contributions helped a vital role in supporting the local economy during the challenging times of the pandemic, demonstrating the economic solidarity and resilience fostered by the *devi/devta* institution within the Kinnaura community. Moreover, the *devi/devta* institution contributes significantly to tourism and the local economy in Kinnaur. Religious tourism, centered on temples like *devi Chandika* Temple in Kothi, *Maheshwar* Temple in Chagaon, Baring Nag Temple in Sangla, and Piri Nag Temple in Sapni, as well as landmarks like Kanam Monastery, *Dabla Shu* Temple, and Chitkul *Mathi* Temple in Chitkul, attracts visitors seeking spiritual experiences. Additionally, sites like Nako, Yulla Kanda Lake, and Labrang, Kalpa, Sapni and Kamru Fort are significant cultural and historical attractions that contribute to the region's tourism appeal. The annual Kinner Kailash Yatra further enhances the region's religious tourism profile, attracting pilgrims and tourists alike (Times of India, 2014). Overall, the *devi/devta* institution serves as a cornerstone of Kinnaura society, influencing its cultural practices, strengthening community ties, and contributing to its economic vitality through religious tourism and pilgrimage activities. Additionally, the *devi/devtas* advocate for environmental conservation, safeguarding sacred sites like temples, lakes, and pilgrimage routes, thereby promoting sustainable practices and preserving the natural heritage of Kinnaur.

Mahajan (2011) mentioned that beyond its socio- economic significance, the *devi/devta* institution also plays a vital role in ecological stewardship and environmental conservation. For instance, in 2006, the involvement of local deity i.e. Chagaon Maheshwar *devta* in protests against the Karcham Wangtoo Hydroelectric Power Project in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, illustrates the deep connection between spiritual beliefs and environmental protection (Down to earth, 2007). Hardiman (1987) observed the significance of the *Devi* movement in empowering marginalized communities to assert their rights and

preserve their cultural identity amidst external pressures. Similarly, in Kinnaur, the presence of *devi/devtas* serves as a guiding force for tribal people, inspiring them to prioritize the protection of their pristine natural surroundings. This connection highlights the intersection of spiritual beliefs and environmental activism, showcasing how traditional cultural practices can inspire contemporary efforts to safeguard ecological heritage. Moreover Halperin (2020) exploration of Himalayan goddess Hadimba's worship unveils the multifaceted relationship between devotees and deity, shedding light on social, cultural, and ecological dynamics. These insights extend to the role of *devi/devta* institutions in Kinnaur, where *devi/devtas*, much like Goddess Hadimba, are associated with natural elements and promote ecological stewardship. Through rituals aimed at preserving ecological balance, *devi/devtas* safeguard natural resources, reflecting a shared indigenous ecological ethic across Himalayan regions like Kinnaur. *devi/devta* worship often entails rituals and taboos aimed at preserving ecological balance, safeguarding natural resources, and mitigating environmental degradation, reflecting an indigenous ecological ethic deeply rooted in Kinnaura cosmology.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it can be stated that the *Devi/devta* institution holds significant cultural, religious, and social importance in Kinnaur, serving as a pillar of the community's identity and cohesion. It plays a vital role in people's lives, offering blessings, resolving disputes, providing financial assistance during emergencies, and contributing to environmental conservation. However, it is also essential to address the institution's negative aspects. The *devi/devta* institution in Kinnaur, while cherished for its cultural richness, faces significant challenges, including caste-based exclusion of artisans and other contributors. Despite their vital roles, these individuals are often barred from temple premises and sanctums. To preserve Kinnaur's heritage and address discrimination, democratizing the institution is crucial. This calls for collaboration among government, NGOs, and local communities to ensure everyone's participation. By fostering inclusivity, Kinnaur can embrace diversity and ensure the institution remains relevant and vibrant.

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