

# A 'Hermit' Village in Kulu

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*This is the sixth of a series of village studies published in the earlier issues of The Economic Weekly.*

*The author has spent the past year in carrying out a field study in Kulu and intends to spend the rest of the year to complete an intensive analysis of the social organisation of the village about which he writes, before returning to the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.*

*This first hand account of direct democracy at work should be of interest to our parliamentarians.*

The Ed.

ABOUT sixty miles north of Simla, as the crow flies, is the Himalayan district of Kulu, an area of some two thousand square miles of rugged, forest-clad mountains intersected by deep river valleys along which the villages are scattered. The mountain ranges are formidable barriers surrounding each valley. It is not therefore surprising to find, as one travels through Kulu, certain variations in dialect and custom, or to note that the villagers of one valley feel a sense of unity and difference when they compare themselves with the people living on the other side of the mountain. But these differences are slight and in Kulu generally the underlying uniformities of social life are such that no villager need feel uncomfortable or out of place, should he visit one of the villages in the neighbouring valleys. He may feel a stranger but not an alien. These remarks do not apply to the village of Malana which, though located administratively in Kulu *tahsil*, is unique in Kulu.

The remote village of Malana is well-known throughout Kulu as the home of "a different kind of people." The village, with nearly 500 inhabitants, is perched on a sort of narrow shelf high on one side of a wild and isolated glen running roughly parallel to the Beas valley (the main river valley of Kulu.) but separated from it by a chain of sharp-crested ridges. The altitude of Malana is 8,640 feet. Through the glen runs the boulder-strewn Malana torrent which has its source on Deo Tibba, the 20,000 foot snowy peak dominating the glen from the north. Below the village, the torrent enters a narrow gorge through which it thunders for about eight miles before it meets the Parbatti river, the main tributary of the Beas.

Malana, which is the only village in this glen, is extremely, inaccessible—particularly during the winter months when heavy snow covers the 12,000 foot Chandrakanni Pass on the range separating Malana from the Seas Galley, and

also the 10,000 foot Rashol Pass opposite the village giving access to the Parbatti valley. During these months, the only route to Malana lies along the bank of the torrent itself—a perilous goat-track winding through the narrow gorge and below immense precipices. Falls of rock and huge boulders from the cliffs above are not infrequent, and tend to discourage visitors to the village. The whole eight miles or so from the Parbatti valley are in the nature of a long and difficult rock climb. In summer, the easiest route lies over the Chandrakanni Pass, though this involves a lengthy climb from Naggar in the Beas valley and an arduous descent of 4,000 feet from the Pass down the precipitous slope to the village. Loaded pack ponies cannot reach Malana by any of the paths, which are passable only to travellers on foot. The nearest village to Malana is about six hours hard journey away (by the track through the gorge).

I stress this severe physical isolation of Malana because it is of great importance when considering the social organisation of the Malanis, and it is indeed the first striking impression that a visitor has on reaching the village—that of a small, compact community standing alone in a tangle of mountains, hemmed in and cut off from the outside world by these very clearly-defined barriers. One result of this isolation has been that Malana has been more or less ignored by the Government, and is rarely visited by Government officials from Kulu. It enjoys a sort of *de facto* independence, and is indeed often jocularly referred to by educated Kulu men as "Malana Free State." It has its own system of village government, its own court for settling disputes, and a measure of village autonomy quite distinct from that of other Kulu villages which have all been drawn into the official administrative system of Government departments and courts in the town of Kulu, and Government panchayats and

minor officials in each Kothi (or circuit of villages). Malana stands alone: independent, autonomous, "different" in the eyes of Kulu people, and certainly in the Malanis' own estimation.

The Malanis have their own language, Kanashi, which must be one of the smallest languages in the world. This differs basically from the dialect of Pahari spoken generally in Kulu. Kanashi has its own grammar, syntax and vocabulary and is not understood by any Kulu villager other than the Malanis. The Malanis also speak Kuluhi—the Kulu dialect—and use this in their dealings with non-Malanis. Only Kanashi is spoken at Malana. No one in the village can read or write and Kanashi is as yet unrecorded. This linguistic isolation of the Malanis can hardly be over-emphasised since it is undoubtedly one of the most important features of the community. It automatically marks all non-Malanis as alien, and seems the prime factor in that "sense of belonging" which is so strong at Malana.

The Malani houses are of the usual Kulu pattern—large, two-storied and substantial, heavily-timbered with massive beams cut from the neighbouring forests. The family lives in the upper storey, while the lower is used as a byre for cattle, sheep and goats, and for the storage of the harvest of food grains. The village is territorially divided into two compact areas of habitation about fifty yards apart, known respectively as Dhara Behr and Sara Behr. Between the two *behrs* is a neutral area known as the *harchar* (meeting-place). Here are located a large stone platform and a grass quadrangle round which are built three "rest-houses" for visitors to the village (and also used for cooking at certain ceremonies, and for village assemblies in the winter months when the village is covered with heavy snow). This central area is of the utmost importance since it is the territorial hub of the village upon which turns the whole

political and judicial organisation.

When asked how many castes there are in the village, the Malanis invariably reply that there are two—Kantes (yeomen) and Lohars (smiths). But the Kanets so outnumber the low-caste Lohars (the actual ratio as given by the Malanis is 116 families of Kanets to 3 families of Lohars) that to all intents and purposes Malana is a one-caste village. Moreover to the Malani Kanet, his village is in the nature of an entire caste: that is, though the Malanis are Kanets allegedly of the same caste as the majority of Kulu villagers, they act when visiting other villages as if they belonged to a caste apart from all others. The Kanets of the village scrupulously avoid physical contact with the Lohars who live apart from the main village in an area below Sara Behr. Socially, psychologically, and

physically, the Lohars are "outsiders"—though nonetheless indispensable from the economic and ritual points of view. The low-caste Lohar is completely dominated politically and almost entirely ignored socially.

The all-important Kanet section of the village is organised into eight patrilineal clans which are the exogamous units for marriage. Though certain of these clans claim that they were originally of higher caste than Kanet, they all now eat, smoke and marry together without restriction. Three of the clans have hereditary rights to the three key offices in the society, and are accorded special respect for this reason. But apart from this, all the clans intermingle quite freely and consider themselves equal.

In theory, if not quite in practice, Malana is an endogamous village.

Occasionally Malani men take wives from the high village of Rashol which lies just outside the Malana glen, but they do not allow the Rashol men to take wives from Malana in return. The Malanis themselves certainly like to think of their village as endogamous, and marriage within the village is the preferred pattern. The Malanis say that the men of Dhara Behr should marry in Sara Behr and *vice versa*. In practice, this dual division is not strictly adhered to, and there are many cases of marriage having occurred between clans living in the same *behr*. This village endogamy is an important feature in the social isolation of the village. Malana is not only physically and linguistically isolated: it is socially insulated from outside contact.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the village is its political

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and judicial organisation. Through out Kulu, Malana is famed both for its village council and as the "village of Jamlu". Jamlu, the powerful tutelary deity of Malana, dominates and pervades the whole village. In his worship, the unity and solidarity of the village are strikingly and elaborately expressed. Jamlu is the ultimate authority, and the source of power, in the political, judicial, and religious spheres. In this sense, the god becomes something far more than a mere malevolent being whom it is as well to propitiate. To an important extent, Jamlu can be regarded as the deification of the village, and as the apotheosis of the villagers. His power and influence form an integral part of social control generally and of the political and judicial machinery in particular.

The power of government at Malana coincides with both the religious and juridical authority and resides in a group of eleven officials which is the village council. The basis of the council's authority emanates from the deity who is believed by the Malanis to have delegated his presiding authority to this body to manage the village in his name. The council is composed of three permanent members holding hereditary office, and eight *jestas* (elders) who are elected according to democratic principles.

The three permanent members are collectively known as the *mundie* (leaders). It is difficult to say whether or not these can be placed in an order of seniority. The Malanis have a strong sense of individual equality and when asked about the relative importance of officials tend to answer that all are equal and that no special official is superior to any other. This egalitarian feeling is an important sociological fact, and is demonstrated over and over again in behaviour. Yet my own observations tend to suggest that these "leaders" can be placed in the following hierarchical order—the *Karmisht* (god's manager), the *Pujara* (priest), and the *Gur* ("mouth-piece" of the god).

The present *Karmisht* is a pleasant young man aged about 22, who assumed office a year ago on the death of his father. His main duties are the management of the lands owned by Jamlu and all affairs connected with the god's treasury. He is responsible to the council for all the accounts (which, being illiterate, he keeps in his

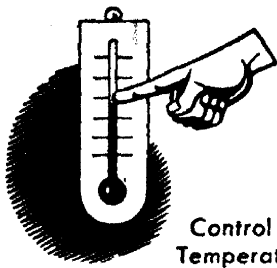
*head* with remarkable facility) He is not recognised as the chairman of the council but seems to act in this capacity. The *Pujara* and *Gur* are powerful figures in the society due largely to the fact, that they possess a virtual monopoly in interpreting "the will of Jamlu"—a vital consideration to all Malanis, particularly when a dispute of any kind has arisen. The *Gur* at certain ceremonies goes into a state of possession in which he becomes the vehicle of communication between the god and the villager. Shaking and trembling violently, with his uncut black hair swinging out as he shakes his head sharply from side to side to the sound of frenzied drumming by the band, he indeed looks a wild figure. In this state, he jerks out "with the voice of Jamlu" answers to questions put to him by devotees, directions about ceremonies, disputes, or problems troubling the village, and general harangues about the benefits of staunch belief, the necessity of following ancestral custom, and perhaps threats of what ill is likely to befall individuals or the village as a whole if the orders of the god are not obeyed.

When we come to consider the eight *jestas*, who with these "leaders" make up the village' council, the hereditary principle gives way to a well-developed form of democratic election based on a form of grouping known as the *chug*. The eight clans are politically divided between the two *behrs*, four belonging to Dhara Behr and four to Sara Behr. Within each *behr*, the clans are grouped in pairs and each pair is called a *chug*. Thus there are two *chugs* in each of the territorial divisions of the village. Each *chug* elects two representatives to serve on the village council. These eight individuals make up the *jesta* section of the council.

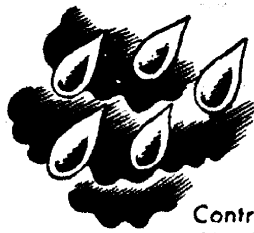
All meetings (except when there is heavy snow) are held on the large stone platform in the centre of the village. The council members gather and sit in a group. The *Karmisht* tells any villager who happens to be at hand to call the public to attend. This man takes up a small piece of stick and, from a point near the platform, shouts loudly at intervals for about twenty minutes, all the time twirling the stick rapidly in his hand. After the last shout, he places the stick on the platform before the council, thus signifying the closing of the attendance roll. By this time all the adult males present in the village

are required to assemble on the patch of ground before the platform' The eight elders survey the assembly to see who is absent from their respective *chugs*. If anyone is absent, a messenger will be sent to his house to call him. If he has wilfully not attended, he is fined three paise if he comes immediately, one anna if he comes within a short time, and two annas if he refuses to come altogether. The attendance of the general public at each meeting of the council is therefore considered compulsory and strong action in addition to these formal fines is taken against any adult male who consistently neglects this duty.

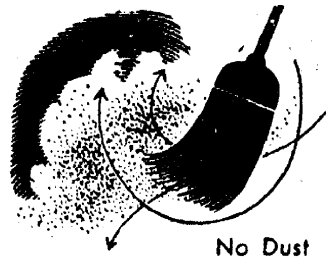
Thus all discussions and decisions take place in full public hearing of the community. The public listens to the arguments, or evidence in a case, and hears how a decision has been reached. As soon as the council has come to a decision, one of the permanent members and one of the elders leave the platform and squat before the assembled villagers. They announce the decision and call for opinions. That is, each council decision is followed by an immediate referendum to the general public. If the majority of the public approve, the decision is ratified, as it were, and becomes final. If there is a strong body of opinion in opposition to the council ruling, the two council members return to the platform and there the discussion begins all over again. Sometime later a slightly amended decision is reached, and the same procedure is followed of referring this to the general public section of the meeting. If this is still not satisfactory, the council will again take up the discussion. In this way, I have seen a difficult problem (in one case, whether or not an exiled Malani—who had committed a theft from the god's treasury some years ago—be now allowed back into the village) discussed from early one morning till well into the evening of the second day before a decision satisfactory to all was reached. During this time the council was in almost continuous session, breaking off only for meals and steep, and the procedure outlined above was repeatedly followed until the original vociferous opposition by a strong section of the public was gradually whittled down to negligible proportions. To my mind, the final decision was only a very slightly modified form of the original. The opposition seemed to have been removed less by a succession of compromises than by being simply worn



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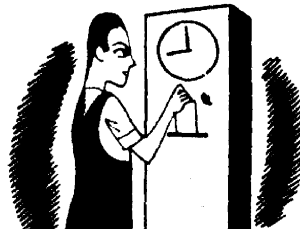
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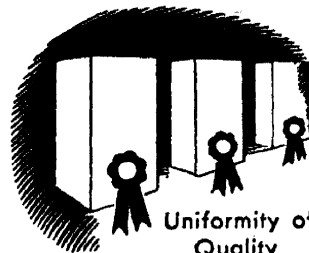
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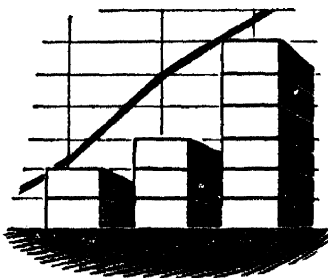
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away by Incessant argument. (This however seems the way of politics the world over.)

But in rare cases an impasse is reached where the council refuses to alter its decision further and where the public is more or less evenly divided in their approval or disapproval. In such a case, the council is dissolved and a general election takes place immediately. Similarly if one *jesta* dies, or is found to be exceedingly officious or otherwise unsatisfactory, or if one of the three *mundie* dies, the council is dissolved and a general election of all eight elders follows.

During my stay in the village, I have not yet witnessed one of these elections but am told by the Malanis that the procedure is as follows. All the adult males of the village are required to assemble before the platform. On the platform, the permanent nucleus of the council—the *Karmisht*, *Pujara*, and *Gur*—sits apart and alone. The assembly squats on the grass quadrangle, each *chug* being grouped slightly apart from the others. The *Karmisht* calls out to the villagers to put forward their representatives to serve on the god's council. Each pair of clans then elects its two elders by majority vote. Only the head of a household is allowed to vote: the principle is "one vote per house". No women have a vote and are in fact not allowed to be present. The low-caste Lohars may be present—they sit apart—but do not belong to any *chug* and therefore have no vote. As the two elders are elected from each *chug*, they leave their group and join the permanent members on the platform. An elder may be re-elected if thought satisfactory by his group. The essential qualifications of a *jesta* are that he must be married, must not be physically maimed or deformed, and he must have been born in the village.

The last election in the village took place about a year ago on the death of the father of the present *Karmisht*. At this time, the former council had been in office for nearly four years. The period between elections is quite irregular. In general practice, however, the old men of the village tell me that an election usually occurs, for one reason or another, every two years or so.

The village council functions in three ways. Firstly, it is the secular government of the village, enacting laws, organising and controlling communal work such as the repair-

ing of a path or water-mill. Secondly, it acts as Jamlu's "vestry", deciding on what expenditure should be made from the treasury, supervising the god's lands and tenants, arranging for new instruments for the band or the re-building of the temple, and so forth; the conduct of parochial business, as it were. And finally, it acts as the village court to try cases and settle disputes. The judicial function of the council seems to loom largest in the minds of the people, and occupies a considerable portion of its time.

The method of drawing the council's attention to a dispute is fixed and formalised. The man with a grievance goes to the platform and there lights a fire in a special fireplace for this purpose. Here he sits until one of the members of the council happens to pass. On seeing the fire burning, it is the duty of the council member to find out what is the matter and then either to call an immediate meeting of the council or to arrange for one in a day or so.

The day before I write this, Hukmu went to the platform and lit a fire. Shortly afterwards an elder arrived on the scene and asked what the trouble was. Hukmu said that he had been bitten by a neighbour's dog. The elder said that he would call a council meeting for the next day. This morning the council met and called the public to attend. Hukmu then made his complaint and displayed the wound on his leg. The owner of the dog said that it was not his dog but someone else's which had bitten Hukmu. Various witnesses for either side were called, and the council then discussed the matter. It decided that Hukmu was right and ordered the dog to be shot and the owner fined four annas. One permanent member and one elder left the platform and called for opinions from the assembly of villagers. The great majority of the public indicated its approval of the decision which was then put into effect. The council then turned to discuss a forthcoming ceremony connected with the god. This is a trivial case but it illustrates the procedure followed.

Offences are classified into two groups—those held to be serious and those not-so-serious. The council indicates whether it considers an offence to be serious or not in an institutionalised way. If the particular case being tried is considered grave, the *Karmisht* takes up a

piece of stone and draws a line with it on the platform in front of the council. Once the line has been drawn, the council insists that the guilty person pays the exact amount of the fine imposed, and not one anna less. On the other hand, if the case is not considered serious, the line will not be drawn and, though the fine may have been announced as ten rupees, the council will accept whatever the man concerned is willing to pay—perhaps five rupees or even two or three. The line is always drawn in cases of theft, however minor, and in any cases concerned with the god; the amount of the fine is then paid into the god's treasury. It is only rarely drawn in cases of quarrels, assault, land disputes, and so forth; and the amount of the fine imposed is shared equally among the members of the council. Thus the drawing of the line is a visible indication of the gravity of an offence. (Possibly the English phrase "one must draw the line somewhere" arose in some such manner as this! At all events, the Malanis "draw the line" in fact, as well as verbally.)

Practically all cases are settled by fines which average about two rupees. Any fine over about five rupees is considered a severe punishment and reserved for the more serious cases. The most serious offence of all in the village is said to be theft, particularly theft of any property belonging to the god. Cases of alleged theft are always tried immediately and never postponed. Once convicted, a thief is always punished by a *fine*, of not less than seven rupees (no matter how trivial the theft) and is required to pay to the person robbed double the value of the theft. Theft from the god's treasury incurs complete and permanent ostracism, of which exile from the village is a natural corollary.

The most severe punishment the council can inflict is that of boycott or ostracism. This involves the total withdrawal of social relations either permanently or for a period of time fixed by the council. If a man is ordered to be ostracised, his whole family living in one house are also involved. No one will speak or have any social relations with any member of this household. They are not allowed to draw water from the springs inside the village, may not go to the communal water-mills to grind their grain, may not attend meetings and feasts, and so on. Their social excommunication is

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complete/Since all council decisions have to be referred to the general public section of the assembly before being ratified, the council are assured of popular support for the final decision. Refusal to pay a fine or to obey a council order runs contrary to popular feeling and, in the circumstances, the enforcement of an order of ostracism is relatively easy. Any member of the village can be ostracised regardless of whether he holds an important political or ritual office. This boycott is a strong weapon in the hands of the council, and is greatly feared by the villagers.

But, as in all matters in the village, Jamlu is the final authority and, if any individual protests against a council decision, he can appeal to Jamlu and have the case decided by the god. This is done by an ordeal in which two young goats are used. In a civil case, each side supplies a goat. In criminal cases, both goats are paid for out of the god's treasury. The *Pujara* sprinkles water from a special pot belonging to the god over the back of each goat. Then all wait to see which goat will shiver first. The goat shivering first is held to belong to the loser in the dispute. This decision is now absolutely final (since it expresses the personal judgment of Jammu on the case) and held to be binding on all concerned. Sometimes this ordeal by goat will entirely reverse the decision of the council, but the council members do not seem in the least perturbed when their ruling is thus proved wrong. They appear to feel that it is only human to err sometimes and that, in doubtful cases, the accused can always appeal to the infallible judgment of Jamlu.

Jarnlu is not only the final court of appeal in the judicial machinery of the village. He is said to be omniscient and omnipresent, and is regarded as particularly malevolent when his rules (i.e. the customs of the village) are not obeyed. He is believed to punish automatically—by blindness, leprosy, madness, death, and a wide variety of minor ills—anyone giving a false oath or attempting to bribe a member of the council. The council members themselves are believed to be exposed to special danger. They are said to suffer speedy punishment from the god should they wilfully give an unfair decision or display special favouritism to relatives or friends. All regardless of rank, wealth, or social status generally

ity or the wrath of the god is incurred. These ritual sanctions are a potent force in social control and emphasise some of the fundamental values in the society; values which are so important as to be guarded and preserved by the very god himself.

Economically Malana is a poor village and the standard of living is below that of the average Kulu village. The altitude allows only one crop a year (a poor variety of wheat and buckwheat) and this is often spoilt by heavy snow late in the winter. All the land is owned by Jarnlu and the Malanis consider themselves as tenants of the god—though of two classes, permanent (having all rights of sale, inheritance, etc.) and temporary (having these rights at the pleasure of the council, and in return for special payments into the treasury). The Malanis supplement their food supply by bartering *ghi*, wool, honey, and game birds in various Kulu villages for rice and maize, rock salt, and iron for tools. In these transactions, the Malanis dislike taking currency and insist on their traditional barter rates even when these rates are unfavourable to them. This insistence on barter causes much amusement to the more sophisticated Kulu villagers whom I have often seen laugh openly at the Malanis for their excessive "primitiveness". But I detect in this laughter a hollow note, and it is apparent that Kulu villagers regard the Malanis with a mixture of humour and mockery (for being "backward"), and awe or even fear (because of their powerful god, their strong group solidarity, and their wild and uncanny nature). Apart from these economic transactions, the Malanis stay firmly in their mountain fastness, interested only in themselves, and brooking no interference whatsoever from outside.

Malana is essentially a "hermit" village. It has developed an almost fanatical sense of difference, of village cohesion, and of intense group loyalty. All who do not "belong" are treated with virulent suspicion and even contempt. No matter how open and friendly one is to them, this suspicion can only be allayed, rarely dispelled completely. At the first favourable opportunity, it bubbles again to the surface and erupts like a volcano. As one Kulu villager said to me: "Malana is like a walnut. It has a very hard shell

outside but is pleasant enough once cracked open." This is undoubtedly true but, as I have found, one of the greatest difficulties in penetrating the formidable social barriers that surround the village lies in the problem of steering a neutral course through the political currents in the village. Malana is united against all outsiders and its social structure provides a good case of extreme social integration. Yet there is nonetheless a constant struggle for power between the three "leaders" based on the dual territorial division. Within the severe limits imposed by the overall cohesion, there is an interesting concept of opposition and balance between the two *behrs*, and a good deal of political intrigue.

The most striking fact about the political and judicial organisation, of the village appears to be the extent to which it rests on public sentiment. The system of election, the necessity for an immediate referendum and ratification of each council decision, the importance of ostracism as a penal sanction, the compulsory attendance of all adult males at every council meeting—all illustrate the sovereign power of public opinion. The village is intensely egalitarian and has a well-developed sense of justice as an abstract concept. Perhaps the primary integrating force in the society is the village god whose influence plays a vital part in the whole social mechanism of government and law. All in all the village provides an interesting example of advanced political and legal concepts obtaining in an entirely illiterate and economically backward society.

It would perhaps be apt to conclude with the following quotation from a book by Lieut.-Col. C. G. Bruce (*Kulu and Lahoul*, Arnold, London, 1914);

"We had a good look . . . at the main Malana valley, and at the track which joins the Parbatti at Jari, a fearsome path down a most impressive and precipitous gorge. Immense cliffs, many thousand feet high on each side, dominated the end of the valley by a mass of mountains, and the best part of eight thousand feet of precipices. No wonder the people of Malana have been able to lead their own life unmolested for *no* many centuries. . . . No more desperate country have I seen in the lower heights of the mountains/'