When the Nars Descended from Heaven

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Résumé : *Cet article explore les processus sociohistoriques qui sous-tendent l'ethnogenèse dans l'Himalaya indien. Considérant le cas des les Nars de Kullu (Himachal Pradesh), il utilise des sources coloniales et des données ethnographiques afin de retracer les facteurs et les conditions politiques qui ont facilité leur émergence en tant que caste distincte à l'ère moderne. Largement conformes à la masse des paysans modestes, les Nars semblent s'être séparés de leurs pairs en développant des rites de purification somptueux pour une clientèle croissante de patrons de haute caste dans le Kullu gouverné par les Britanniques. Alors que l'essor de ces rites peut être daté d'un peu plus d'un siècle, le mythe de la descente du ciel Nar qui les sanctionne renvoie au passé anhistorique. Le conflit entre ces données est résolu en consultant un cas parallèle de l'ouest du Népal, qui pointe les axes complémentaires de la régulation étatique et de l'adaptation culturelle en tant que facilitateurs clés de l'ethnogenèse des castes.*
Mots-clés : *Caste, ethnogenèse, Himalaya, Kahika, Khas, Kullu, Nar.*

Abstract : *This article explores the sociohistorical processes underlying ethnogenesis in the Indian Himalaya. Taking the Nars of Kullu (Himachal Pradesh) as a case study, it employs colonial sources and ethnographic data to trace the contributing factors and political conditions that facilitated their emergence as a distinct caste in the modern era. Largely congruent with the mass of lowly peasants, the Nars seem to have fissioned from their peers by developing lavish purification rites for a growing clientele of high caste patrons in British ruled-Kullu. While the surge in these rites may be plausibly dated to a little over a century ago, the myth of Nar descent from heaven that sanctions them harks back to the ahistorical past. The conflict between these data is resolved by consulting a parallel case from West Nepal, which points to the complementary axes of state regulation and cultural adaptation as key facilitators of caste ethnogenesis.*
Keywords : *Caste, Ethnogenesis, Himalaya, Kahika, Khas, Kullu, Nar.*

The Nars and Kullu Society

The Nars (*Naṛ*, also *Nauṛ* or *Nauḍ*) are a caste (*jati*) of peasant-cultivators who reside in about a dozen settlements between the valleys of central Kullu and northern Mandi in Himachal Pradesh, India.[1] The approximately one-thou-

1. My encounters with Nick Allen during postgraduate days in Wolfson College (Oxford) were always positive and fruitful. Apart from lending books and pointing to crucial works in Himalayan anthropology, his openness and curiosity were an important reminder to stay focused on "big questions" that are worth pursuing. This article is an attempt to address one such question, namely the problem of tracing ethnogenesis in Himalayan societies, while paying tribute to the "salvage aspect" of ethnographic

sand-strong community occupies a somewhat ambiguous position in the social hierarchy, which is broadly modelled on the purity based-Brahmanical ("Hindu") value system of North India. As providers of ritual services related to death, the Nars are intrinsically exposed to the inauspicious defilements associated with demise and decay and thus rank low on the social scale. However, contrary to funerary priests who are invariably classified as Dalits (lit., "oppressed", also "polluting" or "untouchable" [*achūt*]), the state government places the Nars within the Other Backwards Class category. The liminality that is implied in this position manifests in the Nars' precarious location between the Khas (formerly "Kanet") ethnic majority of "caste Hindus" for whom they provide ritual services on the one hand, and the Dalit groups known as Dagis with whom they share certain affinities on the other hand.

The ambiguities surrounding the status of the Kullu Nars are already noticeable in the earliest writings on the region. The encyclopaedic *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, for example, provides two conflicting definitions of "Nar", a term that is simultaneously given as "a synonym for Dági or Kolí in Kullú" (according to the Punjab Census Report of 1892) and as "a distinct caste, equal in status to the Náth, but not to be confused with them" (as per a report on the demarcation of Kullu forests from 1886).[2] By way of contrast, the most detailed of the colonial sources regarding the Nars (which dates to the 1910s) proposes they were originally "of the Kanet [Khas] community and ... are still higher than Kolis [Dagis]", but that "the unsavoury character of their functions has invested them with uncanny attributes and they are taboo to the higher castes".[3] While these sources convey important indices about the community's standing at particular points in time, they fail to agree on a single definition for the caste. Rather, the incongruities between the different definitions of the Nar caste – as "untouchable" Dalits (Dagis), as an Other Backwards Class on a par with householder Nath yogis, or as devolved "caste Hindus" of the Khas ethnic majority – underline the significance of temporal context for any classification of caste.

Before broaching the topic of Nar history, the community may be further analysed in light of the neo-Hocartian assertion that holds the contestation of status to be integral to caste society.[4] According to the latter, the position of every caste within a given society is determined by its hereditary ritual duties

fieldwork that was dear to Nick's heart (Allen 2003). My thanks to James Mallinson, Ram Nath Nar and Kulwant Singh Thakur for instructive discussions while preparing this article. Special thanks to Anne de Sales and Charles Ramble for comments on the Dhaulagiri miners, whose origins played a crucial part in solving this Himalayan puzzle.

2. Rose, 1919, vols 2-3, p. 157-158.

3. Emerson, n.d., f° 386.

4. Quigley, 2008.

in relation to others, and to the "dominant caste" in particular. In the case at hand, both the colonial era-*Glossary* and modern publications from Kullu confirm that the Nars constitute a sub-variant of funerary priests (*acharaj-* or *maha-brahman*s) and are thus peripheral to the mainstay of society.[5] However, the scope of ritual activities relating to death that the Nars actually perform is rather limited. Thus, if funerary priests prepare the ancestral offering of rice balls (*pinda*s), chant mantras, and physically participate in cremation rites, the Nars play an ancillary role in these ceremonies by providing wood for funeral pyres and dispensing of the personal items of the deceased.[6]

The Nars' proxy-connection to the ultimate defilements explains their inconclusive standing in the social hierarchy. It also feeds into their reputation as singularly adept ritual purifiers who consecrate and purify houses and who are still called upon to perform purification rites for upper caste patrons in cases of extreme ritual transgression. Above all, the Nars are especially renowned for administering and providing the human sacrifice "victims" in the grand festival of Kahi.[7]

Held at irregular intervals during the monsoon season, the Kahika Mela is considered the most potent of purification rites in the Kullu Valley region. As with other religious festivals (*mel*ās), the Kahika draws large crowds for social and commercial exchanges that revolve around a series of purification rites. The festival is unique among the *mel*ās in that it culminates with the "sacrifice" and "resurrection" of the Nar ritual specialist who conducts the ceremonies. According to data culled from the *Census Report for the Punjab* of 1892 and from the *Report on the Demarcation and Settlement of the Kullu Forests* of 1886, the festival was already popular in "many Kullu villages" at the turn of the nineteenth century, where it was celebrated in the following manner:

> [A] Nár chosen by the *deota* [village god] is reverenced as Mahádeo [Shiva] and his wife as Síta or Shakti [the Goddess]. He first visits any house whose owner is afraid that he has been bewitched and generally by the ceremony of pounding *bhang* (*hemp*) and *bekar* (a kind of thorn) together in front of a *deota* with prayers for his destruction (*deopane*). The man sits inside his house and the Nár outside, and a young he-goat is killed.

5. Rose, 1919, vols 2-3, p. 157; Lal, 1985, p. 56.

6. Moran, 2018.

7. The first written mentions of the Nars date to about a generation after the British conquest of Kullu as part of the Second Anglo-Sikh War of 1845-6. The writings, which are almost exclusively linked to the Kahika Mela, are (in chronological order): Anderson, 1886 (inaccessible to the author); Rose, 1919, vol. 2, p. 151–152, 217–219; vol. 3, p. 157–158); Emerson, n.d. [1910-30s], chapter 9; Lal, 1985; Thakur, 1997, p. 157-164; Mahashay, 2000; Moran, 2018.

> [An expiatory ritual procedure called] *Chidra* is then performed, the man and the Nár both holding one of the goat's shoulders, which the Nár cuts with a knife, uttering prayers to avert the spells.
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> After this the Nár and his wife go to the temple [of the *deota*], and a cloth is spread on four sticks placed on the ground (*kunda*): four rams are then killed, one at each corner, and the Nár is given as a *wali* [sic] or sacrifice to Shakti. He becomes insensible, is placed in the *kunda*, a rupee put in his mouth, as is done to a corpse, and he is covered in cloths. A sheep is sacrificed on his head so that the *bhúts* or evil spirits may seize on that instead of the Nár, and then by the power of Shakti [manifested in his spouse] the man comes to life again.[8]

This abridged summary provides several clues that are instructive of the logic behind the Kahika Mela and of the social identity of its performers. For one, the identification of the ritual specialists as Shiva and Shakti hints at the transgressive origins of the festival in a popular (*laukik*) creed of Shakta Tantra. That the successful completion of the Kahika hinges on "the power of Shakti" to revive her "insensible" partner (popularly portrayed as "temporarily dead") strongly supports this reading, as do the jocular profanities and sexual innuendos that are made during the festival and that have been suggested as proof of a "promiscuous intermingling of high and low castes" in the uncharted past.[9] This interpretation also explains the Nars' erstwhile reputation as sorcerers or "*tantrika*s", an appellation that is nowadays strongly denied owing to its negative association with Brahmanical heterodoxy.[10]

In terms of structure, the trajectory of expiatory rites from preliminary rounds at individual homesteads to a specially constructed ritual grounds at the focal point of public life adjacent to the village deity's temple confirms the supremacy of Shakti in the ritual. Conceptualized as imperceptible substances that are accumulated from inauspicious actions (*pāp*, *doṣ*), the "sins" are removed by

8. Rose, 1919, vols 2-3, p. 157-158.

9. The *Glossary* explains that prior to the moment of sacrifice "men of any caste, however low, take pieces of wood (called *lánd*, *membrum virile*) and throw them into the women's laps with indecent words and gestures. The popular explanation of this is that the evil spirits will be frightened at the exhibition, but the one given a more educated man is that the ceremony is survival of the old worship of Shiva and Shakti when there was a promiscuous intermingling of high and low castes" (Rose, 1919, vols 2-3, p. 158). A similar wooden phallus was brought by the Nars to a Kahika Mela in 2016, where it was jokingly poked at women and men in the course of festive processions (Harel and Moran, 2018). The item is part and parcel of Kullu's ritual paraphernalia and is encountered in other festivals (e.g., van Groeningen, 2020).

10. Lal, 1985.

the male ritual specialist and accumulated upon his body throughout the ritual in a real life-approximation of the blue throated-Shiva (*nīlkaṇṭh*). The course of karmas is completed with the Nar's sacrifice, which delivers the toxic residue to the higher order of the village deity (*deota*). The tragic outcome of this event is averted by the resuscitative powers of the ultimate source of power, the victim's spouse/Shakti.[11]

Importantly, the trajectory of sins in the Kahika Mela is propelled through the ritual procedure of karmic perforation or "*chidra*" (lit., "hole", "perforated"). As the *Glossary* explains, the ritual negates the effects of ritual transgressions by exclaiming the details of the fault in need of expiation in face of a sacrificial offering, which is then summarily cut and transmitted to the gods. That the procedure is also conducted by others, such as shamans and priests, is significant since the latter also attend Kahika Melas, in which the Nars are supreme.[12] This suggests that the Nars' exceptional talent for purification stems from a source other than the ritual procedure itself.

According to Nars who were interviewed during a Kahika Mela performance in 2016, the capacity for ritual purification runs in the family (*parivār*). Thus, if the knowledge of ritual mantras and devices is learnt and transmitted between generations, the efficacy of their implementation is conditioned on their performance by a biological member of a Nar dynasty (*khāndān*). While these assertions were at least partly motivated by the sumptuous earnings that Nars receive in return for their services, it is also grounded in a historical perception of women of the Nar caste as embodiments of Shakti who are intrinsically superior purifiers.

In a curious paragraph about the "hermit village" of Malana, then a remote outpost on the Kullu-Spiti frontier, the aforementioned *Glossary* tells of a wedding rite between the villager's presiding deity and "a maiden from the Nar caste resident in Manikaran [a small settlement and pilgrimage site in the Parvati Valley, famous for its hot springs]." The rite, which was called "*kaika*", consisted of the marriage of one or more prepubescent girls of the Manikaran Nars to "Jamlu", the all-powerful god-king of Malana. The union between the parties served to purify the divine king through the young brides' virginal powers, a process that would be renewed whenever a Nar spouse reached puberty.[13]

Reminiscent of the *kumāri* cult of Kathmandu and certain Vedic rites (Allen 1996), the existence of "living goddesses" in late-nineteenth-century Malana provides an important index to Nar social history. First, the cessation of divine wedding "*kaika*s" in Malana within a couple of generations paralleled an

11. For a fuller account of this process, see Moran, 2018; also Harel and Moran 2018.
12. On the chidra ritual procedure in Kullu, see Berti, 2012, p. 159-161.
13. Rose, 1919, vols 2-3, p. 265.

apparent surge in the "human sacrifice" (*narbali*) version of the Kahika Melas, suggesting the radical transformation of the ritual took place in a remarkably short time span.[14] Second, that both versions of the rite ultimately rely on divine female energy (*śakti*) for purification, suggests the mock human sacrifices and *chidra* procedures that are encountered in current performances of the festival are immaterial to the central task of ritual purification that is effected by the goddess. Rather, I propose that these embellishments were introduced in a bid to broaden the Kahika Mela's appeal to audiences beyond the core patrons of the Manikaran Nars in Malana.[15]

Finally, the transition from the reclusive mountain cult of Malana's goddess worshippers to the full-blown carnival of Kahika Melas that is popular today may be plausibly linked to the Nars' ascendance of the social ladder. In this respect, the temporary elevation of the ritual specialists to the status of Shiva and Shakti during the Kahika ceremonies contrasts strongly with their lowly status in daily life. Discernible in the performance of *chidra* rites for individual households in the open as per the custom of the "courtyard people" (*koṭedār*) who are prohibited from entering the dwellings of higher castes, this affinity with the "impure" castes of Dagis is explained by the *Glossary* through a historical connection to the Kahika Mela: the Nars had been "chosen by the *deotas* [village gods] from the Dági, the lowest caste of all, to perform in the Káhi festival" and have consequently become "a little higher than the Dágis, and Kanets [Khas] will smoke with them".[16] And while a contrary assertion claiming the Nars had ceded from the "caste Hindu" Khas as a result of their ritual activities was also advanced by a later author,[17] the conjunction of the evidence from Malana with the para-funerary activities of the community lend support to the *Glossary*'s reading of an upwards social mobility.

Given the aggregate data evincing the Kahika Mela's *śakta* origins and the social history of its performers, we may propose a working hypothesis for Nar ethnogenesis: *The Nars had separated from the Dagi ("untouchable") groups to become a distinct caste by proffering their services as ritual purifiers to Khas patrons.* Before putting this hypothesis to the test, it may be prudent to stop and listen to what the Nars themselves have to say about their past.

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14. The ritual procedure of *chidra* was, however, known in Malana in the 1950s, where it was used to negate extreme ritual defilements, see Rosser, 1956, p. 288.

15. Both versions of the Kahika were performed in Malana during the 1900s. The "living goddess" version seems to have disappeared by the 1950s, while the "human sacrifices" had ceased by the 1980s.

16. Rose, 1919, vols 2-3, p. 158.

17. Emerson, n.d., f° 386.

Nar Origin Myths

The Nars tell two types of stories about their origins. The first is a diverse set of ostensibly factual accounts about the migration of specific lineages into their current places of residence; the second is a largely uniform charter myth sanctioning their supremacy in Kahika celebrations that is familiar to all Nars irrespective of their place of residence. Although the two types of stories are anchored in geographic locations from the Kullu-Mandi region, their narratives unfold in starkly different settings; where stories of migration tie individual families to their abodes in an (often blurry) historical timeframe, the charter myth links the entire social body of the caste to a pair of celestial progenitors, whose fall to (a specific village on) earth predates the human reckoning of time. The incongruence between the spatial and temporal settings of the two classes of narratives is balanced by a shared perception of the Nars as a liminal community that is simultaneously oppressed by its neighbours and blessed with a direct channel to divine powers. The story told about Bhuṭṭhī, the westernmost settlement in Kullu wherein Nar families are to be found, is illustrative of these tendencies.

According to the elder Nar of the village, an ancestor of unspecified origins used to be employed as a labourer by Bhots who had formerly lived on site. Despite being constantly abused and underfed, the worker was ever faithful to his masters. One day, the deity residing in that place (*thān devtā*) took pity on the poor man and directed him to a magical mortar stone (*ūkhaḷ*) that made any cow placed above it provide an infinite amount of milk. Apprehensive of their servant's improved health, the Bhots accused him of stealing their milk, cut off his tongue and crushed him to death with the very same stone. The local deity was enraged and summarily chased the Bhots off into Lahaul, clearing the site for settlement by the Nars. The deity then assumed the role of village god, nominated the murdered labourer – aptly named *Nāṅḍhā* ("mute") *Deo* – as a divine assistant (*bāhn*), and increased the annual yield in agriculture from a single crop under the Bhots to two under the mixed caste-community today.[18]

The combined themes of social injustice and Bhot displacement recur to varying degrees in other locales.[19] As the immediate "Others" of Khas society

18. A similar story involving the unjust killing of a Nar features in a myth from the Parvati Valley village of Shirar, which according to some commentators was the site of the first Kahika outside of Malana, see Lal, 1985, pp. 58-59. The structural proximity of the two accounts suggests the ancestor-labourer of Bhutti could have well been a Nar, whose caste identity has been conveniently lost upon deification.

19. In Caukhī village (Parvati Valley), which like Bhutti contains a mixture of Thakurs, Lohars and Nars, the anterior residents are said to have been "Bhots". The link with "Tibet" is even more pronounced in the village of Ghauṭh, which is home to Naur and

in Kullu, the culturally Tibetan communities from the contiguous tracts of Lahaul and Spiti play the critical role of boundary markers, signifying divisions between and within ethnic- and social groups.[20] According to a myth popular in the mid-nineteenth century-Kullu, a wandering god once fell in love with the powerful demoness of the northern end of the valley.[21] The couple's two sons took different wives: the elder wed an unspecified (but implicitly respectable) partner whose children became "caste Hindus", while the second married a "Bhotanti" who fed him Yak meat, bequeathing the degraded progeny of Dagis. The recourse to miscegenation in this still popular narrative reflects the extensive enmeshment of Indic and Tibetan societies along the Himalayan frontier, a social reality that recurs in origin myths on both sides of the divide.[22]

Although the narratives of Nar migrations are devoid of precise dates, their themes and data provide supplementary information that may allow us to formulate a general idea about the pattern of the community's settlement in the hills. First, recall that the early evidence for Nar activities concerns the *kaika* of Malana, which was administered by families from Manikaran, the easternmost of Nar settlements. This would suggest a migration path from the eastern periphery of Kullu (conveniently construed as "Tibet" so as to underline Nar liminality) to the western neighbourhood of Harabagh on the outskirts of Jogindernagar in northern Mandi. The broad swathe of territory that is defined by this east-west trajectory cuts through four contiguous valleys and encompass all twelve of the Nar settlements that have been identified and, by extension, the farthest extent of the area where Kahika Melas are celebrated.

That this is the probable path of Nar migrations is supported by two additional items of information about the Nars of Mandi from the beginning of the twentieth century. At the time, the Nars of Mandi were divided between the village of Tihri adjacent to the Kullu border and the westernmost settlement of Harabagh, a division that persists today. According to the evidence, the Kahika celebrations that were held in honour of Adhi Purak at a temple adjacent to the

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Koli families who occupy the higher reaches of central Kullu. The family deity (*kul devta*) of the Ghauṭh Nars is one of four siblings -- Ajimal, Girmal, Thirmal, and Sinhmal -- who are said to have accompanied their guru Jamlu, the presiding deity of Malana, on his journey from (culturally Tibetan) Spiti into (Indic) Kullu, personal communication Ram Nath Nar; for a recent assessment of Malana, consult Tobdan, 2011.

20. Barth, 1969.

21. Nowadays identified as Bhim[a] and Hadimba of Mahabhrata fame, the powerful ogress has since been recast as the goddess who controls the northern end of the valley from her cavernous temple at Dungri, see Haleprin, 2019. The myth is recounted in Lyall, 1874, p. 149–150.

22. Rodseth, 2016.

Bhubu (*alias* Dulchi) Pass that leads into Kullu used to be administered by Nars from Kullu rather than by the families residing on the Mandi side in Tihri.[23] That this was the custom at the turn of the twentieth century may indicate that the Tihri Nars were then still not sufficiently trained in their ritual tasks. A second point of interest is that the Nar families of Harabagh, who occupy the western extremity of Nar settlement, are known to have migrated from Tihri "a few generations" before the 1910s, that is, *circa* 1850.[24] The aggregated data culled from oral traditions and written records thus suggests a *terminus ad quem* of *circa* 1800-50 CE for the Nars' migrations from Manikaran into Northern Mandi via Kullu.

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The tentative trajectory of Nar migrations delineated by village histories proves immaterial to the story of the community's coming into existence as a distinct social body. Almost entirely devoid of temporal or spatial markers, the folk tradition (*janśruti*) that recounts Nar ethnogenesis centres on the supernatural abilities of their semi-divine progenitors and on the injustices that led to their establishment on earth. The abridged summary below follows the first written account of this origin myth as published by a Kullu journal devoted to local culture; barring minor variations, the narrative is consistent with the stories told by Nar interviewees today:[25]

> The mountain deity Narayan contracted leprosy, a blemish that could only be cleansed through the offering of a human sacrifice.[26] The deity tried to perform the ritual, but was constantly obstructed by demons (*daitya*s). In his frustration, Narayan recalled Brahma, who instantaneously appeared with some timely advice. In the heavenly realm of Indra (*Indralok*), explained Brahma, were two couples of entertainers called Nars, who earned their living by performing for the king of the gods. The Nars were also endowed with supernatural powers, such as the capacity to fly, but were most importantly, uniquely qualified to perform ritual healing and would thus be perfectly fitted to perform the necessary human sacrifice.

23. Emerson, n.d., f° 404.

24. Emerson, n.d.: f° 386.

25. Lal, 1985, p. 57-58. An English rendition of the myth (Thakur, 1997, p. 163-164) follows the same storyline, but it is too heavily Sanskritized to be of use for the present analysis (relevant data from this source is, however, referenced below).

26. Although Lal (1985) gives the generic title of "Narayan", the name of the deity is known to change according to the presiding deity of the area where the story is being told. In Emerson (n.d.) and Thakur (1997), it is Narayan of Hurang in the Chuhar Valley of northern Mandi.

Narayan quickly set out for Indralok in search of the Nars. His enquiries with the heavenly beings revealed that the couples were in fact two brothers named Hitru and Pitru who had married the sisters Chahi and Chakri.[27] Narayan continued with his search but the Nars were nowhere to be found. Angered once more, the deity located their hut and burnt it down. The Nars saw the smoke from afar and rushed back only to find their home and livestock reduced to ashes.

Grief stricken, the Nars howled in sorrow for their loss, which included the musical instruments – *damru* drums and *khartal* cymbals – that were stored in their hut and through which they earned their living.[28] As if on cue, Narayan revealed himself to the Nars and informed them that he had actually secured their instruments in a safe location and (conveniently glossing over his having just burnt their home down) proceeded to request their help in performing the human sacrifice that he needed in order to heal from leprosy. With their backs to the wall, the Nars agreed to Narayan's proposal and proceeded to seek permission from their heavenly patron. Indra permitted only one of the couples to descend to earth so that the other shall remain to wait on him in heaven.

The departing Nars then followed Narayan to his Himalayan abode and began the technical proceedings needed for the sacrifice (*yagya*). They ordered four roof beams, lifted them in a rectangular shape above [a *yantra* of] the goddess and placed a cloth over her. The sacrificial ground constructed, they then lifted the beams on their four little fingers and performed the rites of purification, during which time no demons (*asur*) dared come close to the sacrificial grounds. As soon as they were done, the Nars packed their belongings and set off back towards Indralok.

Shortly after that, Narayan discovered a tiny spot on his finger that was still touched by leprosy. Alarmed, the deity rushed after the healers and having caught up with them, demanded an explanation for the incomplete rite. The Nars responded that the flaw in the ritual was probably due to the absence of rice beer (*lugri*) and rope (*dori*) in the gifts (*dakśina*)

27. The version recounted in Ghauṭh (Kullu Valley) named the brothers Titru and Pavitru, and their sister wives Chehin and Chakori. Taking colloquial corruptions into account, the male names clearly reference benevolence and purity, while the female names are linked to desire and the popular *chakori* bird; my thanks to Alex Cherniak for these suggestions. A similar version was recounted in the village of Bhuṭṭhī (Sarvarai Valley, en route to the Bhubu Pass).

28. The term for livelihood is "*ghoka*" in Kullui (Lal, 1985, p. 57) or "*grenth bhar*", which signifies the distance between the index finger and the thumb, which is the size of the golden bars paid by Indra in return for the Nars' performances (Thakur, 1997, p. 164).

that they were given as pay for their services. Narayan apologetically remedied the lack and bid his healers farewell. Meanwhile, the sages (*ṛṣis*) who had travelled to participate in the *yagya* held a meeting to reflect on the events. It was not long before they began to cast doubts over the wisdom of releasing the Nars back to Indralok. After all, they argued, the world is a dangerous place and it won't be long before some other calamity will require the Nars' service. Are we to be forever at Indra's mercy for help in purification?

Rather than beg the king of the gods for assistance, the *ṛṣis* devised a secret plan to keep the Nars on earth. They took a bowl and filled it with oil, charged it with secret mantras and then ran after the healers, catching up with them at heaven's gate where they presented the bowl as a "gift" that Narayan had forgotten to give. Somewhat surprised, the wife, who had by then crossed the threshold into Indralok, replied that they had already been paid in full and required nothing more. The *ṛṣis* insisted, but the Naran emphasized that oil wasn't part of their fees (*dakśina*) and quickly motioned to her husband to hurry up and join her beyond the gate. Seeing their ploy about to fail, the sages grabbed the Nar by force and smeared his head with the magic oil. The poor fellow fell unconscious in an instant and was quickly carried back to earth. After this the Nars could no longer enter heaven. In this manner, the Nar caste (*jati*) emerged on earth.

The central message of the story is clear: the progenitors of the Nars were exceptional beings whose qualities have, it is implied, passed on to their descendants. As befitting a charter myth sanctioning the authority of ritual specialists, the narrative is careful to bolster the credentials of its protagonists. The Nars are thus first and foremost divine entertainers, supreme beings who – like their descendants in earthly migration tales – were wronged by the terrestrial deities and their followers.[29] Forced into separating from their celestial kin who remain in Indralok, the Nars embark on ritual purification with an ease that is beyond the capacity of the village gods and their subjects.

Although the pursuit of a human sacrifice anchors the narrative, the details of the ritual proceedings give pride of place to the expiatory procedures followed in Kahika Melas today (notably, with no explicit reference to the *chidra*

29. The *ṛṣis*, like *nag*s and *narayan*s, are a class of village deities within the Kullu region. An alternate version from Rumsu tells of the Kullu gods' sacrifice of the first Nar to atone for the bloodshed of demons (*asur*s) in a battle they had earlier won. Rather than allow the Nar to return to heaven, the gods cast barley grains that defiled him and prevented his return to Indralok. The same grains are cast today during the *chidra* rites of the Kahika Mela, see Mahashay, 2000, p. 22.

procedure). The stress is rather laid on the distinctive square canopy that is raised with the aid of four specially cut-beams (*kunda*) to create the ritual grounds, while the timing of the ritual to the monsoon season is hinted at in the prevalence of disruptive demons that thrive during the rains. This reading is strengthened by the positioning of the ritual grounds over "the goddess" in the form of a magical diagram (*yantra*) – nowadays surmounted by an hourglass shaped "cosmic trap" that holds expiated "sins"[30] – and ultimately points to the strong connection of the Kahika Mela to popular *śakta* rites.

Apart from the narrative function of advancing the storyline, the hardships and trickeries that the Nars suffer in the hands of the devious mountain deities and their followers serve to affirm the caste's underprivileged position in society. That one of the two couples remain in Indralok at the end of the tale is significant in this regard insofar as it retains an open channel between the Nars and the divine to substantiate their credentials as ritual purifiers. Finally, the identification of the celestial forebears as professional entertainers is remarkably consummate with the etymology proposed in the *Glossary of Tribes and Castes*, which links "Nar" with "*natu*, shameless", admitting "some connection" with the "*Naṭ* or prostitute caste of the plains"[31]. While the evidence for prostitution among the Nars is non-existent, the substitution of the retroflex *ṭ* with a retroflex *ṛ* or *ḍ* is common enough in colloquial speech to render the Nar provenance with entertainers plausible.[32] The notion of origins in the plains, however, is less likely given the relatively strong evidence for the community's provenance in the Malana/Manikaran region.

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Let us consider the evidence thus far. On the one hand, the village histories from Nar settlements indicate a progressive migration of families from the Manikaran region in the east to Harabagh in the west *circa* 1800-1850. On the other hand, the charter myth that purports to explain the caste's emergence as a distinct social body points to a cultivated sense of liminality that underlines its critical contribution to society as ritual purifiers in the Kahika Mela. Recall also that the preceding section has shown that the historical process of Nar migrations had at least partly paralleled the transformation of the secretive "*kaika*" of Malana (administered by Nars from Manikaran) into the popular "human sacrifice" ritual-spectacles that are performed across the region today.[33]

30. Moran, 2018.

31. Rose, 1919, vols 2-3, p. 158, fn.

32. My thanks to James Mallinson for the latter point.

33. The "divine wedding" Kahikas, which were unique to Malana, were still celebrated in the 1910s, Punjab Government, 1917, p. 71-72. The absence of the Kahika

Given the concurrence of Nar migrations with the development of a new type of Kahika, it is entirely plausible that the "timeless" myth of celestial origins that sanctions the community's activities as ritual purifiers was concocted in conjunction with the transformation of the ritual. If the myth of Nar ethnogenesis is indeed only two centuries-old, then a whole new set of questions about Nar social history may be asked. First, were the historical developments outlined above merely coincidental or could they have been related to broader changes impacting Kullu and Malana in the transition to British rule? Second, how and in what ways did these developments contribute to the emergence of the Nars as a unique caste? The study of ethnogenesis in Himalayan societies beyond Kullu holds important clues for answering these questions.

Reconciling the myth-ritual conundrum with some help from Nepal

In her study of the Dhaulagiri Chantel of West Nepal, Anne de Sales identified the complimentary axes of external (state-level) and internal (community-level) forces as the primary facilitators of social mobility.[34] By examining ethnographic and historical data, de Sales shows that the approximately ten-thousand-strong community, which claimed affinities with the Chandravanshi Chandel Rajputs of the Great Indian Plains in the 1980s, was most likely descended from an assortment of ethnicities from Nepal and Tibet who had coalesced into a group with a shared cultural identity. The transition between these contradictory social categories was ultimately traced to a nexus of economic- and social-strategies that furthered the Chantel's standing in relation to the Nepali state on the one hand, and in relations with its immediate neighbours on the other hand. As shown below, this process illuminates some of the mechanisms that underlay Nar ethnogenesis and is thus worth recounting in some detail.

Economically, the Nepali state's policy of allocating tax-free lands to enterprising miners towards the end of the eighteenth century drew workers from a range of *janajati* and Nepali-speaking groups to settle in the Dhaulagiri region, where they expanded and professionalized copper mining. The workers included freed slaves (Gharti), low-caste metal-workers as well as Tibetans and members of various Tibeto-Burman *janajati* groups. Collectively they were known by the occupational title of Agri, "miners". Having improved their material circumstances, the descendants of these groups reversed the marital strategy of their forefathers: instead of pursuing alliances with women form prominent families in the region, they were now providing wives to aspiring families as per their interests. By the

Mela in Colin Rosser's voluminous ethnography that pioneered the scientific study of Malana suggests these rites had ceased by the 1950s.

34. de Sales, 1993.

1980s, the progeny of the erstwhile migrant-miners had erased the memory of their multi-ethnic origins and assumed the Rajput title of "Chantel".

This historical trajectory was persuasively linked to the regulation of caste relations by the Nepali state as enshrined in the 1854 legal code of the *Muluki Ain*.[35] A product of the country's political elite, the law code regulated social relations in Nepal as per the Brahmanical value system of the Parbatiya political elite. In practical terms, this entailed a fivefold classification of society into distinct groups, the lowest two of which were considered untouchable, and included a number of artisanal castes such as Blacksmiths. The top three were classified on the basis of two criteria: enslavability (*māsinyā*) and alcohol-drinking (*mātwali*). The Parbatiyas, who primarily consisted of Bahuns and Chhetris, ranked highest in this schema since they were neither enslavable nor (officially) drinkers of alcohol. The third position was reserved for especially underprivileged *janajati* groups that were enslavable, drank alcohol, and abided by beliefs and practices deemed heterodox by the Brahmanical elite.

As a "Hindu warrior kingdom", the rulers of Nepal had the authority to ostracize or promote subjects within this hierarchy. This meant that individuals who excelled in battle and/or rendered exceptional services to the state could be advanced to higher castes that would be inherited by their progeny, whereas those who had erred gravely risked having their caste broken altogether.[36] In the case of the Chantel, there is no evidence of such royal intervention having taken place. The community's social mobility can rather be traced to the combination of state- and caste-level policies that have played out over the *longue durée*.

The Dhaulagiri region was home to an ethnic majority of *janajati* Magars of the second order as defined by the *MA* (i.e., non-enslavable alcohol drinkers), who lived alongside a fairly large number of Agri, the descendants of the multi-ethnic miners who had expanded their activities in response to the state sponsored-incentives of the late eighteenth century.[37] Because of their proximity to the Magars and the fact that they had borrowed a number of cultural features from this population – such as clothing and aspects of their shamanic religion – they were often referred to as Agri Magar, even though they were historically unconnected and their language was in fact a creole based on other Tibeto-Burman languages, notably Thakali. By 1908, official documents revealed the existence of a group known as "Chantel", who were descended from these miner families but now classified as superior to Agri Magars. The ancestors of today's Chantel, these families seem to have separated from the parent group of Agris to become a distinct caste. As a result, the Chantel could claim the

35. Höfer, 1979.
36. Lecomte-Tilouine, 2004.
37. de Sales, 1993, p. 92.

status of Rajputs despite retaining obvious *janajati* customs and abjuring some of the most basic expressions of Parbatiya society, such as the wearing of the *janeo* (sacred thread) that is followed by Thakuri Chhetri castes of the region.[38] The formation of the Dhaulagiri miners into a new ethnic group with claims to Rajput status provides important indices for deciphering the history of the Kullu Nars, most notably by underlining the importance of the state apparatus in the articulation of caste identities. Accordingly, to make sense of the emergence of the Nars as a discrete social group we must account for their circumstances at the particular historical juncture and political settings in which our data was created. In Kullu, a gradual erosion in the authority of the Rajput Badani dynasty that ruled over the valley may be discerned between the early modern "golden age" of political dominance (*circa* 1500-1750s) to a more limited autonomy under the Sikhs of Lahore (1809-1846) and, ultimately, as dependant retirees who were officially removed from power under the British (1846-1947). Despite their shrinking hegemony, the rajas seem to have monopolized caste regulation well into the middle of the nineteenth century in a somewhat similar manner to the rulers of Nepal.[39] In the absence of a written codex on a par with the *MA*, the parallels with Nepal may be mined by applying the principles that underlay the social mobility processes of the Dhaulagiri Chantel to Kullu society.

As noted above, colonial records indicate Kullu society in the nineteenth century was divided between a "caste Hindu" majority of Khas peasants (alongside a thinner stratum of Brahmin and Rajput elites) and a sizeable minority of "untouchable" Dagis and affiliated castes. In the absence of an indigenous legal code, a closer examination of British Indian sources may be used to refine our understanding of these groups. The aforementioned *Glossary of Tribes and Castes*, for example, tells us that the Khas (here given as "Kanet") were not only the most numerous social groups in Kullu, but that they also shared their status and intermarried with the similarly numerous Ghirths of Kangra, a valley and erstwhile kingdom to the south-west of Kullu beyond Mandi. The Ghirths, in turn, display a remarkable semblance to the Gharti of West Nepal insofar as they (1) constituted a majority of the population in absolute numbers (like the Khas in Kullu); (2) were internally divided into numerous sub-groups (proverbially 360); (3) were known to be descended from caste miscegenation (or illegal intercourse); and (4) were famous for rising in the caste hierarchy within a few generations.[40]

38. de Sales, 1993, p. 96.

39. Private documents from upper Kullu reveal that it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that the British were sought after to remedy cases of ostracization that had traditionally been diverted to the Kullu rajas to adjudicate (Diserens, 2001).

40. Rose, 1919, vol 1, p. 287-295, for the entry on "Ghirths"; for five characteristics resonating with the Kullu Khas, consult *ibid*., p. 287-288.

The affinities between the Ghirts of Kangra – and, by extension, the Khas of Kullu – suggest the mass of the peasantry in Kullu may have well been equivalent to the Gharti (synonymous with Agri) of West Nepal. This assertion is strengthened in light of the overall lax attitude towards caste distinctions in early colonial Kullu, which only became "gradually more defined" in the 1870-90s.[41] If the dynamics of social differentiation (and mobility) among the Kullu Khas corresponded with those of the Ghirths of Kangra, it is not unlikely that a similar process played out among the Kullu Dagis, their proverbial "half-brothers" according to local myth (see above). The analogy does not end there. Where the Nepali state's economic policies and legal code supplied the vector and frame of social mobility for the Dhaulagiri Chantel, the erosion of Rajput authority in Kullu facilitated the rise of multiple contenders for dominance in the social and political arena.

Already compromised by Sikh supremacy (1809-1846) and gravely undermined with the limitation of the Rajput dynasty to a tract (*jagir*) on the left bank of the Parvati River (alias *waziri rupi*) under the British (1846-1947), the village communities of Kullu gained an immediate relief from excessive taxation (between 30-50%) and compulsory labour services (*begar*) to the ailing regime of old. For the villagers of Malana, the change in circumstances would have provided a remarkable opportunity for upping their regional standing.[42] The rising importance of grazing to the regional economy would have played into this process, as Malana controlled high-altitude pastures that were more salubrious than Kullu proper and also generated a substantial income to its residents, as well as from the sell of grazing rites to external herders.[43] With the Pax Britannica's ban on military conquests, the Malanis appear to have augmented their rising fortunes by initiating lavish ritual procedures, including an elaboration of the "living goddess" tradition of *kaika* into the stately "human sacrifice" festivals of the Kahika Mela today.[44]

Since the Kahika Mela ultimately relies on the Nars for its execution, we may cautiously propose that the Manikaran families who assisted in the Malani rites played a part in these developments. By embellishing the "divine wedding" *kaika*s to generate a grand spectacle showcasing their patrons' political authority (through the monopoly over violence that is implied in the "human sacrifice"), the Nars created a ritual that, on the face of it of, seemed entirely novel. With the limitation of Rajput rule to the left bank of the Parvati River, the Nar families from Manikaran

41. Rose, 1919, vol 1, p. 219, citing forest settlement officer Alexander Anderson.

42. On the cultural strategy of the Malanis as counterweights to the regulative state see Axelby, 2015.

43. Diack, 1898, p. 2. For an historical outline of this process see Singh, 2009.

44. The Kullu kings, like other monarchs in the region, sustained their relative impoverishment under the British by upholding state level-rituals that affirmed their authority, see Berti, 2009.

and beyond seem to have proffered their new specialization in "human sacrifices" to patrons across the former kingdom, the erstwhile subjects of the Kullu kings.[45]

We thus arrive at a plausible course of Nar social history through their rituals. Responding to the levelling of the political grounds that was occasioned by the erosion of the Rajput rulers' power, the Nars joined their Malana patrons to assert power through an elaboration of the modest *kaika* into the staged "human sacrifices" that display political dominance. Differentiated from their peers through ritual activities, the Nars extended their services to the numerous novel patrons that emerged across the valley with the removal of the Kullu kings. Since the Nars were already settled in their westernmost point (Harabagh) by *circa* 1850 while retaining close connections with the Kullu Nars for performing Kahika ceremonies in Mandi, we may surmise that the human sacrifice version of the rite that was developed in the Malana region was exported west in parallel to the erosion of the Rajput dynasty's authority.

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To summarize, the Nars of Kullu seem to have emerged from an interplay of external and internal pressures that are not dissimilar to the processes experienced by the miners of the Dhaulagiri. Caught between a rapidly changing socioeconomic environment and political uncertainties, the community of death ritual auxiliary specialists embellished its repertoire and expanded its clientele to improve its material conditions and social standing. As specialists in death rites, the Nars still receive items belonging to the dead of their Khas patrons (as did the Nath householder yogis till a couple of generations ago), suggesting fission from Dagi (Dalit) groups, which are considered below them today.[46] And while the long-term effects of this process are perhaps too early to be evaluated in full, the preference for cross-cousin marriages that is reported by the still primarily endogamous Nars today would indicate an early stage of willed separation from a parent group.[47] The link between the charter myth's propagation of a heavenly provenance and the transformation of the Kahika festival more than supports this reading.

The credibility of the hypothesis presented above, according to which *the Nars had separated from the Dagi ("untouchable") groups to become a distinct caste by proffering their services as ritual purifiers to Khas patrons*, is thus augmented by temporal and political contextualization. Thus, while the myth of provenance

45. The Valley of Chuhar in Northern Mandi was part of the Kullu kingdom until the middle of the eighteenth century; Lyall, 1874, p. 112.

46. This practice was shared by the caste of householder Nath yogis till the 1970s, the two communities still enjoy the status of "real kin" (*dharambhais*) with caste Hindu patrons.

47. Certain Nar families will, however, marry Thakur Khas men.

in Indralok has been revealed as a recent creation that stemmed from empirical changes following the abolishment of Rajput rule, it also points to the special care mandated in the study of oral traditions propagating "timeless" truths; in this case, by linking the emergence of a liminal class of ritual specialists from the heavens to the long term effects of terrestrial conquests by what would have undoubtedly been an equally mysterious power in the nineteenth-century Himalayas, the British in India.

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