

Geographies of Difference: The Gaddis of Dharamsala

Speaker: Stephen Christopher

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Lobbying for status creates an important platform for forging, reconciling, casting and recasting identities. At the same time, the social, political, economic and cultural implications that entail such lobbying further plays into identity formation and the sense of rights identified with such identities. The politics of identity formation associated with such lobbying, moreover, represents emic and etic perceptions of a certain community. The Gaddi community of Dharamsala (in Himachal Pradesh, India) represents one such case, wherein, political realignment of their status exacerbated the existing ambiguity by engendering and reinforcing hierarchical tendencies.



Stephen Christopher and Patricia Uberoi (Chair)

Until 2002, the Gaddis living on the Kangra side of the Dhauladhars in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh were designated within the category of Other Backward Castes (OBC). Subsequently, however, they were granted the status of Scheduled Tribe (ST). The presentation looked at the socio-cultural implications of this political realignment; specifically the ways in which, the Gaddis of Dharamsala are negotiating the abstract criteria for ST with their everyday realities – Tibetan neighbors, economic shifts from pastoralism, slate mining and scratch farming to tourism work, and new forms of cosmopolitanism.

According to Christopher, the Gaddis of Kangra are nowadays looking less and less tribal, straining to reconcile a static government classification with disparate emic notions of what is a tribe. He extensively engaged with the issue of how the Gaddi community is now cleaved between high-caste STs and low-caste Scheduled Castes) SCs – the Sipis, Halis, Badis and Dhogris. How has political realignment further alienated these caste groups who exist in the tenuous peripheries of what it means to be a Gaddi?

His study, Christopher informed, was located in the gap within the existing corpus of literature on Dharamsala that fails to look at it from the lens of the Gaddi community, especially the smaller-castes within them. It shows how most scholars and tourists who arrive in Dharamsala, perceive it – the place – through the Tibetan lens, blinded by the razzmatazz of Tibetan images of monks, the figure of Dalai Lama, monasteries and so on. Thus resulting in what he calls, ‘erasure of gaddis’.

Beginning with a working thesis that questioned the discourses about Gaddis and how they are fashioned into social forms with political, economic and psychological consequences, Christopher’s study looked at how these discourses are perpetuated by high caste Gaddis as STs and negotiated by low-caste Gaddis as SCs. How the understanding of these processes and parallel processes of discursive framing among Tibetans and other ethnic groups provide a broader and nuanced foundation for theorizing community and peace-making in Dharamsala? How do historical claims and political discourses structure Gaddi identity? What is the recursive identity loop between Chamba and Kangra? How are ‘caste-tribe’ notions being negotiated, and what strategies are being used by those belonging to low-caste groups to overcome perceived otherness? And does the Gaddi-Tibetan relation share a sense of community?

Christopher confessed to the difficulty of providing a true anthropological definition of who a Gaddi is. He instead examined how caste and tribe as political and social discourses filter into villages around Dharamsala and structure notions of work, history and in the end, defining Gaddi identity based on the notions of inclusivity and exclusivity. This contributes to forms of rejuvenation for high-caste Gaddis to distance themselves from low-caste Gaddis, as the former engage in pastoral work, while the latter, in more of sedentary kind of labour.

At the same time, he refrained from scholarly tendencies to consider Gaddi as a paradigmatic shepherding people because by focusing on the shepherding aspects of Gaddis, it reinforces the high-caste aspects and overlooks the broader shifts in Gaddi culture and social life itself engendered by modernization of the place (Dharamsala in this case) and the communities occupying those spaces.

According to the speaker, the SC-ST classification is an arbitrary classification that says nothing about the true identity of the Gaddis, but more about political parties who wrangle for vote banks, and about high-caste actors who maintain cultural legitimation through these categories. It shows that cultural consciousness is a deeply ambivalent and polyvalent category, for high-caste Gaddis may affirm hierarchy rather than mutualise it, then push smaller-castes out of Gaddi community by appealing to some notion of Gaddisation or they might include them into the Gaddi family by discussing the arbitrary fashioning of the caste system.

Further showing how historical claims fashion Gaddi identity, he traces the migration history and provides two kinds of migration stories, where he links the claims of refugehood and overlapping discourses to the former, which narrates their seeking refuge in the mountains from the marauding Muslims under Aurangzeb in the 17th century. But these claims of refugehood overlaps with similar claims by other communities like the Tibetans, the Churas and other migrant communities. The second migration history represents emic notions of the community and shows a conceptual split between the high caste and the low caste Gaddis in terms of religious, social and economic practices.

The perceived 'otherness' of the smaller-castes are overcome through several means which lead to further alienation of the smaller-castes who aim to move closer to get into the Gaddi fold. For instance, the participation of Halis, a low-caste Gaddi group, in the Radha Soami Satsang Beas, with the idea of following the pure rituals of Gaddi has led to further alienation from Gaddis.

Similarly, their elevation into a higher caste by pushing down the Churas (who, though are not Gaddis, but belong to Haryana and U.P) has further deepened the hierarchies within the Gaddi community. The adoption of the name Arya by the Halis, was another way through which they started losing the perks of their status, as it attributed to a high-caste status.

Yet another aspect touched upon during the presentation was the Gaddi- Tibetan relationship and their sense of community, which is shown in the politics of naming a place. Thus, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala is referred to as Dhasa by the Tibetans (in reference to Lhasa) while the Gaddis refer to it as Thalu(?), which is derived from *tiara*, a place demarcated for gossiping, a culture destroyed in the 1960s with the coming in of the Tibetans. He pointed out the power relations associated with naming a place and an absence of community relationship between the Gaddis and the Tibetans. Nevertheless, community relationship was marked through economic interdependence-tourism and other related activities-however weak it may be.

Discussion

The discussion touched upon several aspects pertaining to the status of Gaddis as tribes, the nature of their mobility, the Gaddi-Tibetan relationship, the role of the state in confounding the situation and methodological issues, among others. What emerged was a diffused picture of a community, grappling with the socio-political and geographical forces that create new perceptions and how the community is redefined in terms of the continuous negotiations with these perceptions.

Report prepared by Reeja Nair, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Stephen Christopher first came to India 11 years ago as a student at the University of Hyderabad and Banaras Hindu University. Although he's worked in China and South Korea for some years, he remains in orbit around India. Jaipur, Leh and Dharamsala are his second homes. Stephen is a PhD student at Syracuse University and a Fulbright scholar for 2013-14. He is roughly halfway through his fieldwork and hoping for constructive criticism to inform his research agenda in Dharamsala in the upcoming months.

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