

# Sacred Response to Environment

## The Gaddi and His Mountain

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The Himalayan ecological crisis is today a major concern among policy-makers, environmental activists and academicians. The Gujars and the Gaddis, two Himalayan nomadic groups, and their grazing cattle are seen as the main cause of soil erosion and denuded forests. These two groups are being urged to give up their nomadic way of life and accept a more developed and supposedly eco-friendly sedentary mode of life. Many development programmes are being launched to 'rehabilitate' these wandering nomads.

In this presentation I seek to explore the ecological world-view of the Gaddis and show how this world-view as well as the life-style based on it are in complete harmony with nature and have for centuries helped preserve the eco-socio-cultural nerve centre of their existence, namely the Dholadhar range of the Himalayas.

The Gaddis are a semi-nomadic pastoral group whose economic activity revolves around sheep rearing and agriculture. The Bharmaur sub-tehsil of the Chamba district, Himachal Pradesh, is the homeland of the Gaddis and is called Gadiyar or Gaderan after its inhabitants.

Gaderan, situated on the Dholadhar range of the Himalayas, is not just a physico-geographical entity but possesses a symbolic multi-level identity. The Gaderan land contains within itself the Brahmalok — Bharmaur. Brahmalok belongs to Brahma Mata or Bharmani, the original deity and ruler of Bharmaur. Chaurasi, the main temple complex at Bharmaur, which according to popular belief contains 84 *shivalingas*, represents the celestial kingdom both at the micro and the macro levels. What appears to the naked eye is at the micro level; and to the wise or to those with deep inner vision the real and pure celestial kingdom is perceivable. Thus Chaurasi is not a mere reflection or a replica of the original kingdom, but in fact is the real celestial kingdom. Chaurasi is immortal. Situated at the *yonis* basin of Shiva, it remains intact during the cosmic dissolution. Chaurasi also represents the meso-space, the middle space mediating between the individual microcosm and the macrocosm of eternal space — the Mani-Mahesh Kailash. It is not just Chaurasi, but the entire hill terrain inhabited by the Gaddis, that is held sacred. There is no place for the profane here, as the entire land is the *Shiv Bhumi* or Shiva's *jalhairi*.

The *Shiv Bhumi* or the *yonis* basin (*jalhairi*) stretches from Kharamukh (15 km west of Bharmaur village), the meeting point of the river Ravi and its tributary the Buddhal Nallah, to Mani-Mahesh (36 km east of Bharmaur). Mani-Mahesh represents eternal space, which has neither an end nor a beginning. The soil from Kharamukh to Sundrasi (a spot en route to Mani-Mahesh) is made of copper, and that from Sundrasi to Mani-Mahesh, of gold. The Dal lake, located at the feet of Mani-Mahesh, has a spot, Kali-kund, the endless pit leading to Piyalpuri, the nether land. The peaks of Mani-Mahesh represent Shiva's Vaikunth, and Bharmaur is Bharmani's Vaikunth. Lord Vishnu's Vaikunth is located deep inside the Ksheer-Sagar, which is situated under the waterfalls at Dhanchcho (one of the stopovers en route to Mani-Mahesh).

The temporal world consists of four paths, and they all lead to Chaurasi, where the river Vaitarani flows. The 2½ steps the soul climbs to reach the court of Dharamraja are also located at Chaurasi. After death, the soul crosses 16 bridges and then by one of the four paths reaches Dharamraja's court located at the Dharameshwara temple in Chaurasi. The gates of the celestial space of Chaurasi are guarded by Bhe or

Bidh Mata, who is also known as Lakhna Mata.

As in life, so in death man is seen as closely related to cosmic elements. If during his lifetime man's survival is conditioned by his response to the environment, whether social or natural or biological, his fate after death is decided by 14 witnesses who accompany the soul on its journey to Dharamraja's court. These witnesses are day, night, morning, afternoon, evening, moon, sun, stars, air, water, fire, earth, *akasha*. The shrine of the fourteenth witness, Chitra Gupta (who in a sense encapsulates the deeds of the soul in the temporal world), is situated in front of the entrance to the Dharameshwara temple. In my view this is an ultimate statement about man's total dependence on nature as well as an acknowledgement of its supreme power. This is also an acknowledgement of the fact that it is indeed the bondedness of the biological being with nature and his actions within the temporal world (both physical and social) that sustain a Gaddi in life and death.

The ultimate destination of the soul is the Mani-Mahesh Kailash, beyond the boundaries of mundane space and time. The ultimate goal is to become one with the cosmic realm of Shiva, the lord of the Dholadhars. Mani-Mahesh represents eternal celestial bliss — for here Shiva at his benevolent best lives with Mata Gorja, whose *man ka mahesh* (beloved) he is. Shiva created Mani-Mahesh as his abode after his marriage to Parvati.

Shiva resides at Mani-Mahesh for a period of six months and migrates to Piyalpuri, the nether land, during the winter months. The migratory period of the Gaddis coincides with the migratory pattern of their main deity, Lord Shiva. It will not be off the mark to state that the Gaddis' notions of space and time as well as their eco-socio-cultural configurations are conceptually derived from this upward-downward movement of Lord Shiva. The Gaddi annual calendar of activities is accordingly divided into two halves and represents two distinct modes of life during the summer months at Bharmaur and the high passes of the Dholadhar, and winter months in the valley of Kangra.

The Gaddi universe is spatially conceived of as being on a vertical axis.<sup>1</sup> On the one end of the axis is Shiva's Kailasa and on the other is the nether land. The up and down movement on this vertical axis is cyclical and follows nature's rhythm. When Shiva migrates to Piyalpuri, he takes away with him all the living creatures, so the Gaddi too migrates. This upward-downward movement is so important to the Gaddi that it is reflected in his more sedentary existence as well, namely in the construction of his houses, which stand as if on a vertical pole and the life within the house, which also follows this movement.<sup>2</sup> The vertical axis is so important that the horizontal axis in fact is seen as an undifferentiated mass of things and beings.<sup>3</sup>

Nothing would be more off the mark than to view Gaddi migration as a mere economic pursuit. Ironically, all development programmes launched in the Dholadhar mountain range are aimed at making the Gaddis move towards a sedentary way of life. Their migration pattern is seen as a clever attempt at grabbing land on both sides of the Dholadhar on the one hand, and retaining their scheduled tribe status on the other. The relationship between the Gaddi and his flock is again understood in purely materialistic terms, so he is urged through various administrative means to give up sheep rearing. High taxes on sheep and goats, the closing of traditional pastures and routes, the planting of trees in traditional grazing grounds, the introduction of horticulture and offers of clerical jobs at local C.P.W.D and electricity departments are some such means, which according to the Gaddis have done more harm than good.

What must be understood is that to a Gaddi his way of life is not dispensable. His mountains, his sheep and his pastures are not dispensable either. He derives his socio-cultural, religious and territorial identity from these. They not only sustain him but are also sustained through him. The protection of sheep is the reason why Shiva created the Gaddi in the first place. He is a nomad because his lord himself is a nomad. He roams from pasture to pasture, from hill to hill, because his lord has ordered him to do so. In his nomadism and pastoralism he is doing what the lord of the Dholadhar himself does. The boon of sheep rearing was not granted to the Gaddi easily. A Gaddi became a Gaddi by Shiva's blessings, who

first tested his integrity as a shepherd.

Shiva tested the Gaddi. He gave him a flock of sheep to tend. The Gaddi saved the flock from the attacking bear, risking his own life. He saved it from the attacks of the wild dog. At last, when he sat to eat, Shiva drove his flock away. The Gaddi forgot his meal and ran after the flock and brought it back. At night, when he was about to sleep, Shiva led his flock astray. The Gaddi ran after the flock and spent the whole night bringing it together. Shiva was convinced at last. He gave the Gaddi his flock and his garb and made him a Gaddi.

The *chola* and the *dora* (the Gaddi dress) are indeed an extension of Shiva's own self in the same way, as sheep rearing and nomadism are. The Gaddi body is created with the *mitti* (earth) taken from Shiva's body, and this act of creation takes place while Shiva is seated on his royal seat (*gaddi*). The area where the Gaddi lives and tends his flock is the majestic Dholadhar (the grey pasture land, grey because of the clouds). This pasture land rests in Parvati's lap or in the *yoni* basin of Shiva. Space thus is seen here as a Shiva-Parvati continuum or as a *purusha-prakriti* continuum. The Gaddi is an extension of this space. The Gaddi body, created with *mitti* (earth) from Shiva's body, the Gaddi garb a symbolic extension of Shiva's own self, the Gaddi cap, whose top represents Shiva's Kailasa, and the flaps of the cap that represent the inner chambers of Parvati's abode, repeat the *purusha-prakriti* continuum. The Shiv Bhumi or the *jalhairi* that protects and nurtures the Gaddi has the central axis of its existence in Lord Shiva, who himself is embedded in this *bhumi*.

Thus the Gaddi space is both immediate and physical on the one hand and eternal, metaphysical and transcendent on the other. The five primeval elements that fill the ecological space also fill the biological space of the Gaddi body. Thus water is what flows in the form of blood. Air constitutes breath. Earth makes flesh and bone. It may be pointed out here that it is only he who is created from *mitti* is blessed with life (motion), *prana* (air).<sup>4</sup> Fire gives strength, vigour and vitality. *Akasha* is consciousness. *Akasha* as sun are the eyes. The soul resides in the innermost chamber of the heart.

This world-view of the Gaddi does not just remain discussed or referred to discourse but is actively practised. The life of the Gaddi shepherd is a life of discipline, austerity, and acknowledgement of the interdependence and bondedness of man with the great forces of nature and its eternal rhythm. Nature and its forces are revered, and the most sacred act is the act of maintaining their purity. This is done through the moral and ethical order. As body and mind are kept away from pollution through moral conduct, so is the environment.

Each stone, each *dhar*, each slope and each spring is sacred. Each has a deity or represents a deity. Obeisance is paid to each. Each *nallah*, each stream, has appeared as a result of some sacrificial act by ancestors. The *sui* fair at Chamba annually pays homage to Rani Naina Devi, who sacrificed her life in order to release the flow of waters. Bharmani Mata is the most revered deity, from whose feet flow the waters of the Bharmani Nallah. She, according to one of the legends, stole the waters from the *naglok* in a *bibri* (a long vessel made of dry pumpkin) and provided them to Bharmaur. *Minjar ka mela* worships rain, sun and Varuna.

The village *panihar* (place for washing, bathing and drawing water) is a sacred place. Each newly-wed daughter-in-law is taken there to offer prayers. After the bath the bather cleans the *panihar*, removes the dirt and offers *dhupa* (incense), *sindur* (vermilion) and flowers. *Panihars* are beautifully carved places where figures of gods and ancestors are prominently displayed and worshipped. The great reverence for water comes in the form of an acknowledgement of mother earth as *jalhairi* (water reservoir). Along with the worship of water, the sun is worshipped too. Water is offered to the sun. There is some archaeological evidence that the Gaddis were sun worshippers at one stage. It is noteworthy that the Gaddi calendar of fairs and festivals is solar in nature. The festival of Patroru is associated with the worship of fire and Shiva. It is also a festival of flowers and green leaves. Domestic fire is revered too. *Halva* is offered to the fire god at the time of lighting a new oven.

The Gaddi shepherd on the mountain passes interacts with his resource base in a responsible manner. He not only reveres the mountains but leads a life that follows the principle of non-pollution, minimising waste and conserving self, flock and land. The Gaddi refrains from taking liquor as a mark of respect to the deity of a given pass. He does not spit or litter the place in any manner. Where and when the shepherd can relieve himself are specified. The Gaddi shepherd is well aware of noise pollution. Up in the mountain passes, he is prohibited from talking aloud, making loud sounds or laughing aloud. If he does so, stones will start rolling down the mountains and snowstorms will destroy him and his flock. The Gaddi shepherd at the passes eats only once in a day and that too at a specific time. Nobody is allowed to eat or light a fire after that. The Gaddi shepherd, while up in the high pastures, does not erect tents. No matter how cold it may be, he sleeps in the open along with his flock and receives warmth from his sheep. Rock projections serve as his shelter from rain. Rock spirits are offered three coloured grains of rice, five sweet cakes, a loaf, a flour-lamp with a red wick, three kinds of flowers, three pieces of *dhupa* and a she-goat. The deities of the *dhars* (mountain summits) are offered a he-goat. Permission is taken from the deity of the pass at the time of entering and leaving his area. This life of austerity and restraint is oriented towards the preservation and the conservation of life-sustaining elements, which we very often dismiss as the superstitions of primitive minds.

Gaddi pastoralism or transhumance also helps conserve the ecology of the Himalayas. Studies of transhumance show that "it maintains an equilibrium among men, animals and pastures in the mountain regions that are unsuitable for conventional agriculture. The animals are important sources of primary products such as milk, meat, wool, hides and skins. The system calls for a judicious use of the available resources — herds and pastures . . . . The ecological aspect of transhumance is as important as its economic significance. In high altitude areas movement of cattle helps afforestation. While traversing over mountains they exert pressure on seeds and spawns deposited on leaves of plants, thereby fixing these in the soil to regenerate. . . . Also, the process of rotation grazing and weeding out of necessary shrubs and grass helps tree and plant growth in these regions" (Sud 1992:4; Khatana 1992).

And one last word about the Mani-Mahesh *jatar*. Shiva is supposed to have come to Bharmaur from Kashmir with 84 *siddhas*. They lit a fire and filled the area with smoke. The ruling deity, Mata Bharmani, was furious. She turned the 84 *siddhas* into stone *lingas* and ordered Shiva to leave and move to his Kailasa. Shiva in veneration to this deity decreed that all persons intending to go on a pilgrimage to Mani-Mahesh must have a dip in the Bharmani pool and offer prayers at the Bharmani temple. Failing this, the pilgrimage would not be acceptable to him. So even the lord himself was not allowed to desecrate the socio-ecological order. The annual pilgrimage to Mani-Mahesh is a Gaddi's way of paying tribute to this order. The Mani Mahesh *jatar* not only reinforces the Gaddi's moral and socio-cultural order, it also makes him an integral part of the cosmic-ecological rhythm of the lord of the Dholadhars.

## Notes

1. Even the creation of the world is conceived of as having taken place on a vertical pole. The world according to the Gaddis originated from the *mulvriksha* (the *arbour mundi*). In the beginning there were only deep waters. First a *kumbha* (pot) appeared in them, from which emerged a banyan tree. The upper portion of the tree got transformed into the three faces of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, the lower part of the tree became *prithvi* (earth), on which later appeared *rishis* and *gurus*. The primal image of the emerging world gets translated into the symbolic representation of the Gaddi land, where the *arbour mundi* and the pot appear in the forms of the *axis mundi* (Mani-Mahesh) and the water reservoir (*jalhairi*).

2. A Gaddi house, made of pine logs, planks, mud, cowdung and slate slabs, generally consists of three storeys. The ground floor is called *obra* and is used for keeping cattle. A staircase called *manjh* leads to the first floor, called *mandeh*. The *mandeh* serves as the living room during the winter months. The second floor is called *chhapar* and is used as family quarters in the summer. This is the most auspicious space in the house and family idols and icons are usually kept here in a cavity called *thola*, in which also rests the central beam of the roof. Life within the house symbolically replicates the seasonal migratory pattern of the Gaddis. The entire household along with the hearth moves up to the second storey in the

summer and comes down to the first floor during the winter.

3. Horizontally viewed, Mani-Mahesh stands in the centre of the earth, and on either side of it stretches the temporal world, which is the homeland of humans, animals, deities, spirits and demons. It is *devaloka* (land of deities), *mrityuloka* (land of mortal creatures) and *rakshasa bhumi* (land of demons) all at once.

4. In one of the Gaddi myths of creation Brahma first created a man of gold, but he wouldn't breathe, no matter how much Brahma blew into his mouth. The same fate was met with men made of silver and copper. Brahma then took a small piece of *mitti*, created a human form out of it and blew into its mouth; and the form became alive.

### References

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