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Colin Rosser and the 'Hermit' Village of Malana: a lost classic of Village Studies Ethnography.

In the decades after Independence, the study of rural life became the backbone for new sociological understandings of a rapidly changing India. A network of scholars was established that, taking the village as their unit of analysis, set out to conduct field-studies in all areas of the country. The arrival of these 'village studies' anthropologists in rural India focused attention on the ways in which customary forms of caste, family, politics, and religious beliefs were being reshaped by economic change, electoral democracy, and state-led development efforts. Many of their initial findings were circulated in *The Economic Weekly* and were subsequently brought together in collections such as Srinivas' *India's Villages* (1955) and McKim Marriott's *Village India* (1955). Some that were later published as full ethnographic monographs gained classic status: works by Frederick Bailey, Kathleen Gough and M.N. Srinivas continue to be widely read (and restudied) today. The era of the ethnographic 'village study' – lasting roughly from the late 1940s to early 1970s – remains a touchstone for those charting changes in the social life, lifestyles and beliefs of rural India.

Initial Impressions of the 'Hermit Village'

Of the first wave of village studies ethnographers, it was Colin Rosser who chose what was – physically and psychologically – perhaps the most challenging location to undertake fieldwork. After graduating from the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge, Rosser joined the newly created Dept of Cultural Anthropology at SOAS in 1950 to study for a PhD under the supervision of Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. Perhaps because he had served as a Gurkha officer in India in the Second World War, Rosser favoured the Himalayas as his PhD fieldsite and he remained attached to the region for the rest of his working life. Rosser left London in 1951 taking with him the two bottles of brandy that Fürer-Haimendorf suggested as essential medical supplies. The following twenty-one months would be spent living in Kullu District which was then part of Punjab state[1]. Though she is not mentioned in any published account, throughout this time Colin was accompanied by his wife Tessa.

Rosser had already earmarked Malana as a possible site for study even before his arrival in Kullu. Nevertheless, he spent the hot and monsoon seasons in Kullu before heading for the Pin Parbati valley in the autumn of 1951. A full day's walk from its closest neighbour, he found Malana 'perched, at an altitude of just under 9000 feet [approx. 2700 meters] above sea level, on a narrow shelf high on one side of a wild and isolated glen surrounded by formidable mountain ranges' (Rosser 1956: 1)

> 'High pastures, dense forests, jagged rock outcrops forming sheer cliff faces, numerous small streams plunging over high waterfalls down to the main Malana torrent, precipitous slopes, and finally an eight-mile long gorge closing the exit – these are the chief characteristics of the terrain inhabited by the Malanis' (Rosser 1956: 89).

The severe physical isolation of Malana is stressed by Rosser because of its great consequence when considering the social organisation of its inhabitants. Malana could not be called a typical Kullu village. Though the Malanis used Kullui in their dealings with outsiders, within the village they spoke a language - Kanashi – which is not spoken or understood outside Malana: 'it automatically marks all non-Malanis as alien' (Rosser 1952: 477).

Perhaps most strikingly, the Malanis saw physical contact with all outsiders as highly polluting. Visitors to Malana were forbidden from touching people, possessions or buildings; they were not allowed to bring leather items into the village; nor were they permitted to walk on village footpaths. Any transgression to these rules was punishable by a stiff fine. 'Malana stands alone: independent, autonomous, "different" in the eyes of Kullu people' (Rosser 1952: 477).

[1] The District of Kullu (also spelled Kulu) was merged into Himachal Pradesh on the 1st of November 1966.

> '...the Kulu villagers regards the Malanis as a group which stands outside the main stream of social life in Kulu; a group which is strange, foreign even, and without parallel in other Kulu villagers however remote... The Malanis are regarded as wild and uncanny by their Kulu neighbours.... In many of their customs they appear backward and "jungli" to the much more sophisticated Kulu villager' (Rosser 1952: 477).

The result of this physical, linguistic and social isolation was that Malana 'ha[d] been left more or less to govern itself' (Rosser 1956: 33). Enjoying a kind of de facto independence, Malana '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' (Rosser, 1952: 477).[2]

This was the village that Colin and Tessa Rosser sought permission to take up residence in. The reasons for wanting to do so were obvious for: 'as a unit of study for the anthropologist it emerges from its background with singular clarity' (Rosser 1956: 49-50). However, singular clarity or not, it was a unit that was resistant to being subjected to ethnographic study. Knowing it would be impossible to obtain the use of a Malani house or stay with a local family, Rosser devised a plan to build a small hut on the edge of the village. After negotiations lasting several months, he succeeded in obtaining a plot of land. This site was levelled and three trees cut down and cut into planks ready for construction. At this point, for reasons to be explained, prominent figures in the village came out in vehement opposition to the idea of this Englishman building a residence: they attributed all kinds of ulterior motives to explain Rosser's desire to settle in the village – spying on them for the Government, assessing them for tax, or stealing from Jamlu's treasury. Realising that any attempt to settle in Malana could only succeed 'at the cost of alienating at least half the village' (1956: 458), Rosser had no option but to retreat back down to Kullu. He wrote: '[t]he failure of the plan cost me a good deal of time, effort and money – but taught me much about the way the political system works in practice' (Rosser 1956: 455).

Unable to take up residence in Malana, Rosser spent the winter of 1951/52 writing about what he had learned in his first six months in Kullu. The resulting account was submitted for publication in *The Economic Weekly*. Rosser's initial census of households in Malana recorded 116 families organized into eight patrilineal clans (these defined the exogamous units for marriage). Significantly all these clans intermingled quite freely and considered themselves equal (Rosser 1952: 478). Rosser suggested two factors contributed to this feeling of village egalitarianism: first because of the closely connected ties of kinship (village endogamy meant that everyone was related to each other in multiple ways), and second because of the lack of economic differentiation (all households practiced a combination of agriculture and pastoralism). The isolation, independence and egalitarianism of Malana were personified in the powerful tutelary deity of the village: Jamlu.

> 'Jamlu....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.... To an important

[2] Rosser would have been aware that Malana village had long been subjected to the gaze of foreign visitors. AFP Harcourt described Malana as 'perhaps one of the greatest curiosities in Kooloo' and writes of how 'the inhabitants keep entirely to themselves, neither eating nor intermarrying with the people of any other village, and speak a language which no one but they themselves can comprehend' (1874: 94). Malana's social isolation and the efforts they made to avoid the ritual pollution of the outside world appears, ironically, to have attracted the interest of these travellers despite their awareness that the people of the village 'are very jealous of any strangers coming near them' (Murray-Aynsley, 1882: 24). In his Settlement Report of 1874, James Broadwood Lyall recalls several occasions when the people of Malana 'mobbed or abused European travellers who have visited Malana and gone anywhere near the temple with boots on' (1874: 157). The travelling sportsman Enriques noted during his visit that the people of Malana 'will do all that is in their power to keep their secluded valley to themselves, and do not encourage travellers or sportsmen to visit it' (1915: 46). The 'semi-independent' attitude of the Malana people was so marked Whistler notes that 'as late as 1883 a mountain-battery was detailed to march through the glen and spend some days in the village as a hint to the people to curb their insolence' (1924: 208).

> extent, Jamlu can be regarded as the deification of the village, and as the apotheosis of the villagers' (Rosser 1952: 479)

Recognising that the caste divisions found elsewhere in Kullu were not present in Malana, Rosser described the existence of a complex social system that divided the village territorially into two separate areas of habitation: Dhara Behr on the east of the village, and Sara Behr on the west. Of these two, it was the more conservative Sara Behr that had most strongly objected to the Rossers' attempt to reside in the village. Between the two *behrs* is a neutral area known as the *harchar*: '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 organization' (Rosser, 1952: 477). At one end of the *harchar* is the main temple of the village; in the centre of the square a sacred stone represents Jamlu; and at the far end of this main temple square the village council meets.

Rosser's 1952 article in *The Economic Weekly* provides a detailed description of Malana's village council. This body – the basis of the claim that Malana is India's oldest democracy - is made up of three permanent hereditary post-holders (collectively known as the *mundie*) and eight elected elders (called *jestas*). The three permanent members of the council are the *Karmisht* (whose responsibilities cover acting as the manager of Jamlu's estates), the *Pujara* (priest) and the *Gur* (through whom Jamlu is able to speak). The eight *jestas* were periodically elected to represent each of the clans that make up the two factions of the village. Containing the *mudie* and the *jestas* the eleven members of the village council or *Hakam* debated religious and judicial matters. Decisions would then be put before the full council made up of an assembly of all the households heads (*chakars*) who can express their approval or disapproval.

Rosser's initial impressions of Malana published in 1952 was of a village that was not only physically remote but also insistent on enforcing a strict social and political separation from the wider world. The article, along with other village studies accounts published by *The Economic Weekly* between October 1951 and May 1954, was republished in a collected volume edited by M.N. Srinivas under the title 'India's Villages' (1955). In his introduction to these essays, Srinivas explained that some were 'tentative in the extreme' having been 'written after three or four months in field, and while the field-work was still in progress'. He went on to acknowledge that 'it is common experience that the facts which are collected in the latter half of one's stay are much fuller and more accurate than those collected in the first half. They frequently modify, and even occasionally contradict, the facts collected in the first few weeks of one's stay in the field' (1960 [1955]: 1). Until the publication of the book you hold in your hands, the sole widely available account of Rosser's time in Malana was the one published in *The Economic Weekly* in 1952 which was included in Srinivas's collected volume of village studies (1955). Yet it only during the second half of Rosser's time in Kullu, when he and Tessa became the first Europeans to reside in Malana village, that he was able to obtain a more complete of the social, economic, and political lives of the people of the village.

The mystery of Malana's isolation

The rejection of his first efforts to move to Malana provided Rosser with an early lesson in the workings of the political structure of the village – change was possible, but it took place according to a strict ritual logic that was bound up in the Malani people's cosmological relationship with Jamlu.

Though from the outside Malana might appear strongly unified, Rosser identified a constant internal struggle for power between the Karmisht, Pujara and Gur and the two territorially divided *behrs'* (1952: 482). He characterised the people of Sara Behr as feeling closer to Jamlu and being more conservative in attitude. By contrast, the Dhara Behr faction appears less hide-bound, more receptive to new ideas. This division has been apparent in the Behrs different reactions to Rosser's initial request to reside in Malana. In keeping with their respective characterisation, the hereditary position of Karmisht was reserved for Dhara Behr while the Pujara were drawn from Sara Behr. When Rosser arrived in Kullu a young man named Jara had recently inherited the position of Karmisht. Jara spoke for Dhara Behr to try to convince the village assembly of the financial advantage that might be derived from selling milk, wood and

vegetable to the Rossers and how the English couple would distribute free medicine to the sick (1956: 457-8). The Gur and Pujara from the Sara Behr faction has not been persuaded as Rosser had to reconsider his plans. After wintering in Jari village, in the Spring of 1952 Rosser again petitioned the assembly to be allowed to reside in Malana. A compromise was reached with Colin and Tessa were granted permission to pitch their tent on the edge of the village. This was accepted by the Sara Behr faction because it signalled the success of their efforts to prevent Rosser from living in a permanent dwelling; at the same time Dhara Behr could claim that their arguments had also been recognised. Over time other restrictions were partially relaxed: after several months of residence Colin and Tessa Rosser were granted permission to use the village footpaths. In an interview conducted in 2013, Tessa Rosser told me that she spent her time in Malana by teaching herself to use a typewriter, helping Colin by cooking meals and running the camp, and looking after various dogs that inhabited the village.

The Rossers stayed in Malana until December 1952. The PhD thesis that resulted from this period of residence remains the most complete account of the economic, political and social organisation of this unique community. Its central enquiry questions the ability of the households of Malana to survive in such an unpromising environment:

> 'No one type of economic activity can by itself keep them alive, and this follows from the ecological condition imposed by their habitat. Agriculture is a hard struggle against land shortage, desperately poor soil, and a severe climate: pastoralism is constantly threatened by outbreaks of disease: the volume of trade, though vital, is inadequate alone to sustain any Malani family. The lucrative activity of herb-collecting depends much on climatic conditions; early snow covers the high slopes and makes herb-collecting impossible. Every Malani family exists by a mixed economy involving all these types of economic activity.... Wealth and poverty are always relative concepts: in Malana, the range between them is extremely narrow' (Rosser 1956: 115-16).

In the balance of economic activities, Malana's households conformed to those pursued in other villages of a similar altitude in Kullu. In the highland zone between 2100 and 2700 meters, only a single crop was possible each year and villages had no more than 10 to 15 households. Yet, with over 100 households, Malana was similar in size to the large settlements found in the most favoured parts of the fertile and irrigated valley bottom. The solution to the riddle of Malana's elevated existence, unmentioned in Rosser's *Economic Weekly* paper of 1952, is solved in his 1956 doctoral thesis. As revealed in Chapter 3 of this book (particularly pages 74-85), Malana is exposed to be considerably less self-sufficient and more outwardly turned than its 'hermit' image might suggest. Rosser shows us how in the 1950s (and indeed for a long time prior to then) the people of Malana were able to extract a proportion of the crop (*kar*) from their neighbours on account of the temple of Jamlu possessing rights over agricultural land (*maufi*) around the valley. Recognising Malana's isolation as 'a fiction', Rosser establishes Malana's dependence on an extended set of cosmological and economic relationships. Paradoxically, the successful management of these relations required the projection of a collective image as fearsome, dangerous, separate and different.

What is clear is that the Malana that was opened up to Rosser in 1952 had a record of success in managing its relations with the pre-colonial, colonial and immediately post-colonial state. However, the system through which the Malani people had maintained their separation was vulnerable to the sorts of changes apparent in India after Independence. Already in 1950s questions about the legality of collecting Muafi were being raised. Rosser considers how change would affect Malana.

> 'The Malanis are obviously well alive to the crucial part played by this external food supply in their whole economy, and are intensely afraid that if the exact details [of the extraction] of this *kar* reached the ears of the Government in Kullu town, measures might be taken.... which would be extremely damaging to the Malani economy' (Rosser 1956: 82).

Rosser chose to share the information he had gained with the head of Kullu's district administration (and in doing so, justified the wariness that the Gur, Pujara and the people of Sara Behr had about revealing their secrets):

> 'Just before I left Kullu in December 1952 I discussed this subject with the sub-Divisional Officer in charge there. He explained that it was the Government view that the very large loss of revenue resulting from the alienation of lands to temples could not be justified. The view was that the expenses of a particular cult should be borne by the devotees concerned, and not by the Government as was the present case where revenues which should be collected in the normal way now was paid into the cult treasury, there to be used for the expenses of ceremonies and the remuneration of services. I was told that it was the Government's intention to abolish all *muafis* "in the near future", to confirm the present tenants in their occupancy, and to collect from them the normal land revenue according to the current assessment' (Rosser 1956: 86)

What effect would these changes have on Malana? Rosser was in no doubt about the likely consequences of the loss of the land held in the name of Jamlu:

> 'the abolition of Jamlu's muafi would have the most severe and far-reaching effects on the social system of Malana and might well initiate a major process of social change. The economy would suffer a damaging blow, but probably equally important would be the effect on the deep-seated beliefs in the power of the god' (1956: 86-87).

Malana Today

It is no longer necessary to walk to Malana as Colin and Tessa Rosser had done; today a jeepable road carved into the walls of the valley terminates a short distance from the village. The basic layout of the village is still apparent with the *harchar* and temple square separating the Sara Behr and Dhara Behr sections. However, the size of the village has tripled since the 1950s – the 2011 Census records 365 families residing in the village Malana and a total population of 1,722.[3] Many of the old wooden houses apparent in Rosser's photographs have been replaced by concrete structures, slate roofs are now tin, and satellite dishes hang from the eaves of several houses. Pollution taboos remain: a series of signs warn that touching or taking photos of the sacred buildings will be punished with a heavy fine. Physical contract with the residents of Malana is similarly to be avoided. But visitors are no longer required to request permission to enter Malana and nor do they need to remove leather shoes and belts at the edge of the village. However, the most significant change since the 1950s is in the economic basis sustaining Malana's continuing existence.

In his thorough review of agricultural production and household economy in Malana at no point does Rosser mention cannabis cultivation (1956: 89-92). Hemp that grew naturally in the area was likely used for making ropes and shoes, and the seeds eaten in the winter for extra nutrition; it's possible that shepherds smoked the leaves of the plant while passing the time at their alpine pastures. But, on the whole, there is no evidence to suggest that in the 1950s the people of Malana were involved in the production or consumption of *charas.* This was to change dramatically in the following decades: in the 1970s and '80s, a handful of European *charas* enthusiasts took up residence in Malana. During the harvesting season from July to October these *charassi* would take the abundant weed growing in the valley and, massaging each flowering bud between the palms, would draw resin from the plant. The villagers soon caught on to this technique and started making and selling the *charas* themselves. The climate of the southern foothills of the Himalayas is well suited to growing cannabis and that produced in the Pin Parbati valley is of particularly high quality. In 1994 a batch of 'cream' from Malana was entered into High Times Magazine's prestigious Cannabis Cup where it was judged to be one of the two finest hashish smokes in the world. By the early 1990s the village of Malana was operating as part of the global economy: while some of this cash crop is sold directly to tourists, much is exported across India and

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[3] https://www.censusindia.co.in/villages/malana-population-kullu-himachal-pradesh-12882

overseas (Axelby 2015). Where apple orchards have been enthusiastically adopted in the lower altitude areas of Kullu, Malana is, it seems, too high for horticulture.

Over the decades, the development of roads and tourist infrastructure have, somewhat ironically, combined with images of pure and undeveloped nature to drawn domestic and global tourists to Himachal in ever increasing numbers. Once again, this tourism takes particular form in Malana. The exotic and edgy feel of the village, coupled with the popularity of its main export crop, have made it a destination for European and Israeli travellers who have been joined, especially in the last decade, by young Indian tourists (Axelby and Rigaud 2019). Colin and Tessa Rosser may have been the first Europeans to take up residence in Malana, but they were not the last.

Given the 'hermit' status Rosser assigned to the village, the intrusion of tourists might seem strange. Among the people of Malana there is a growing understanding of the impacts of tourism and the negative stereotypes that attach to their village. In 2016 the partying activities of visitors, and the introduction of new types of drug-taking, became too much and the matter was referred to the village council. The debates that followed can be seen as a re-run of the unresolved arguments from the early 1950s about the terms on which Tessa and Colin Rosser might reside in Malana. On one side, the less hide bound Dhara Behr (which includes several families who own guesthouses) pointed to the economic benefits of tourism while, on the other side, the more rigid Sara Behr replied that such intrusions were corrupting to the Malani youth and defied the will of Jamlu. After several months, the village collectively agreed to close the village guesthouses and, once again, to prevent foreigners from staying in Malana. However, for all the disruption created by the hordes of tourists who come to the village, it seems the income is too important to turn down: the decision to close the village to visitors has since been overturned by the same council, and the guesthouses reopened. The debates taking place in Malana reflect (and in some respects are in advance of) similar discussions about the destructive impacts of tourism and change that are taking place throughout the Kullu valley.

Connecting past and present: Malana Village and Colin Rosser

Colin Rosser's academic connection to Malana did not extend beyond his doctoral fieldwork. He went on to do extensive research among the Newars in Nepal and taught at the University College of Swansea (now Swansea University) and University College London before establishing a successful parallel career as a consultant in development and urban planning. In 1984, he was appointed the first chief of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), a thinktank based in Kathmandu which serves as a training centre and undertakes research in physical ecology and economic development in the Himalayas and Hindu Kush region. Colin Rosser died in 2012 aged 86. Aside from a short visit in the 1990s, he never again returned to the remote village of Malana where he had begun his academic career.

Srinivas's India's Villages (1955) remains widely read. But while other contributors to that volume went on to turn their research into full monographs, until now Rosser's hastily written initial impressions of Malana remains the sole published account of his time in village. That brief account first published in 1952 largely conformed to the stereotype of an isolated hermit village, of Malana as a self-contained tribal society. In this respect, Rosser's research sits oddly when read alongside similar accounts from elsewhere in India that tell of rapid change in the decades after Independence.

Until now, anyone wishing to read the fuller description contained in Rosser's PhD thesis would have to visit the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and request to view the copy stored in the Special Collections Reading Room[4]. The final results of Rosser's extended fieldwork in Malana are rich in empirical detail and offers a baseline against which development can be measured. What is more, they offer an account of change which fits well with contemporary thinking. Moving beyond simple

[4] A library card contained on the inner sleeve records previous readers as P Phillimore of Hedley Grange Farm (17-19th Jan 1975 and 14th April 1975); Declan Quigley of Cambridge in March 1980; S Day in 1981; Dr DD Taylor of SOAS in 1987 and Mr MM Verma of Chandigarh in 1987.

evolutionary notions of progress – of isolated tribal societies and villages bound by tradition - in this account Malana is recognised as a dynamic product of its involvement in processes extending from the local to the national to the global. Looking beyond romanticised images and negative stereotypes, Rosser's thesis provides the reader with a proper appreciation of this fascinating village and the manner in which it manages its contradictions. The decision to publish the thesis in book form is to be welcomed: this is a lost classic of the ethnographic village studies genre.

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