

Hermit Village or Zomian Republic? An update on the political socio-economy of a remote Himalayan community

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ABSTRACT

Hidden in a remote valley in Himachal Pradesh, the Village of Malana appears as a self-governing egalitarian community cosmologically committed to evading external influence. With its own system of village government and its own court for settling disputes, Malana enjoys a measure of village autonomy under its powerful tutelary deity, Jamlu. This article asks whether James Scott's concept of 'non-state space' can be extended to this isolated corner of the Indian Himalaya. Might Malana be a surviving example of what Pierre Clastres termed 'a society against the state'? Why would the people of Malana opt for self-imposed isolation and how have they been able to maintain it?

This paper follows the attempt made by Colin Rosser in the early 1950s to undertake ethnographic fieldwork in 'the hermit village of Malana'. Reviewing Rosser's efforts to solve the mystery of Malana's physical, social and economic isolation, this paper considers changes in the society and economy of rural India and also in the ways in which anthropology as a discipline has approached these topics. Updating the story to the present permits a re-evaluation of Rosser's finding as we consider how change has come to Malana village¹.

An Anthropologist in the Valley of the Gods

The Kullu valley possesses many striking examples of *shikara* style temples built in stone. Managed by a special class of hereditary priests, a large number of these temples are to be found in the former capitals of the

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1 The research for this paper was made possible a SOAS CSAS travel grant. I am grateful to Professor Edward Simpson, Dr. Alpa Shah, Dr Paul Boyce and two anonymous reviewers for the EBHR for reading versions of this paper and providing helpful advice and comments.

Kullu Rajas at Jagatsukh and Naggar. The most important temple is to be found in the district capital of Kullu town (formerly known as Sultanpur) which was the seat of the Kullu Rajas until 1847. The Raghunathji Temple houses the ruling deity of the valley of whom the Raja was considered the earthly representative. To the ordinary Kullui these imposing temples represent the imported religion of the Rajas and the Brahmins. Though these 'new' gods are respected, the feeling persists that the real gods of Kullu are to be found in the villages².

Each Kullu village, or group of neighbouring villages, has its own tutelary deity known as the *devta* or *devi*. These village gods are anthropomorphised so as to personify each village and share a common identity with the land and people. The substantial relations between the *devtas* and *devis* reflect the past and existing social relationships between the villages of which they are the supernatural personifications. These deities are believed to be related as siblings, or as father and son, mother and daughter, or husband and wife.

The centre-piece of the ritual calendar in Kullu is the great annual Dussehra festival³. Carrying their associated deity on a palanquin, villagers from throughout the valley join a parade of over 200 gods on the Dhalpur maidan in Kullu town. Held in honour of Raghunathji, at Dussehra the people of Kullu pay homage to the Kullu Raja. This reading extends to suggest assimilation into a greater Hindusim as the indigenous *devtas* and *devis* bow down before the imported god of the Rajas (Berti 2006: 61).

At the great Dussehra festival however one god stands apart. Jamlu, the god of Malana village, does not enter Kullu town but instead maintains a detached position on the far bank of the river Beas.

Kullui tradition places Jamlu's origins somewhere to the north of the Himalayan range. The god wandered through the mountains until, after many years, he reached the Hampta Pass which looks down into Kullu. The Kullu gods didn't want Jamlu to settle in their valley so, as Jamlu crossed

2 'In contrast with Raghunath, whom oral stories present as an outsider brought to Kullu by a seventeenth-century Raja, village deities are mostly depicted as 'autochthonous' of the region, or at least as being already there before the beginning and the consolidation of the royal dynasty' (Berti 2006: 45).

3 See Luchesi 2006 for an extended description of the Kullu Dussehra festival and the relationship between Lord Raghunath and the village deities.

a swing bridge in a basket, the Kullu gods administered a collective kick to the basket which, with Jamlu in it, soared into the air and over the mountains, finally landing in the Malana glen. This legend explains why, in relation to the other deities that reside in Kullu, Jamlu occupies an independent and, in some respects, hostile position.

Jamlu's refusal to attend the Dushera fair is a mythological reflection of the relationship that exists between the people of Malana village and the wider world - they, like Jamlu, occupy an independent and, in some respects, hostile position. But, in the words of Colin Rosser who conducted fieldwork in Malana in the early 1950s: 'Jamlu's mythological exclusion from Kullu does not result in his exclusion from the Kullu pantheon... Indeed he is widely and commonly referred to by Kullu villagers as "the most powerful" of all Kullu gods' (1956: 63-64).

This article follows the attempt made by the Welsh Anthropologist Colin Rosser to undertake ethnographic fieldwork in 'the hermit village of Malana'. Rosser found there a self-governing egalitarian community cosmologically committed to evading external influence. Here I compare Rosser's depiction of Malana against recent academic thinking on stateless societies; in particular James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Scott's argument is that people in upland Southeast Asia can only be understood in relation to larger and more powerful political entities. To Scott *all* aspects of hill communities can be seen as predicated on resisting forms of state intrusion and control. In order to escape the projects of organized state societies - slavery, taxation, conscription - Scott describes the disparate people of Zomia as having created a variety of stateless societies. Drawing on Rosser's work on Malana I ask whether Scott's concept of 'non-state space' should be extended to this isolated corner of the Indian Himalaya. Might Malana be a surviving example of what Pierre Clastres (1989) identified as 'a society against the state'? Why would the people of Malana opt for self-imposed isolation and how have they been able to maintain it?

My argument proceeds in three parts. First I outline Rosser's fieldwork and his initial account of Malana (1952)⁴ and draw a number of comparisons with James C. Scott's recent writings on stateless societies. The second section contrasts Rosser's 1952 article against his PhD thesis (1956) in

4 Also printed in Srinivas's edited collection *India's Villages* (1955).

which he sought to solve the mystery of Malana's economic, social and political isolation. Finally by updating the story to the present we are able to re-evaluate Rosser's finding to consider how change has come to Malana village. Here Rosser's accounts aid an appreciation of Malana's political engagement with wider polities, the workings of transnational economies and how identity and ethnicity might be used to manage both engagement and separation.

The 'wild and jungli' hermit village of Malana

In an article published in *The Economic Weekly* Colin Rosser describes the villages of the Kullu⁵ valley as sharing underlying uniformities of social life 'such that no villager need feel uncomfortable or out of place should he visit one of the villages in the neighbouring valleys. He may feel a stranger but not an alien'. There is though one exception to this rule for he adds that these remarks do not apply to the village of Malana which, 'though located administratively in Kullu *tahsil*, is unique in Kullu' (1952: 477).

A day's walk from its closest neighbour, Rosser found Malana 'perched, at an altitude of just under 9000 feet above sea level, on a narrow shelf high on one side of a wild and isolated glen surrounded by formidable mountain ranges' (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 (ibid: 89).

The extreme physical isolation of Malana is stressed by Rosser because of its great consequences when considering the social organisation of its inhabitants. Malana could not be called a typical Kullu village. Though the Malanis⁶ spoke Kulluhi⁷ in their dealings with outsiders, within the village

5 To maintain consistency I have rendered Rosser's spelling of 'Kulu' to the contemporary 'Kullu'.

6 Following Rosser I have used 'Malanis' as the collective term for the people of Malana village.

7 A Western Pahari language.

they used their own language called Kanashi. Kanashi is not spoken or understood by any Kullu villager other than the Malanis: 'it automatically marks all non-Malanis as alien' (Rosser 1952: 477).

Rosser also found the Malanis' kinship organisation to be fundamentally different from that found in the typical Kullu village. Elsewhere in Kullu, Rosser describes a 'fundamental cleavage' between the clean castes [*bhitarka* or *handarka* meaning of the inner circle] on the one hand and the unclean castes [*baharka* meaning outsiders] on the other (1956: 14-15). For the most part this cleavage did not exist within the village of Malana for 'the Malanis do not bother very much about the finer distinctions of caste differentiation'. Rather the people of Malana 'regulate their behaviour towards all Kullu villagers outside their own glen in terms of this *bhitarka* / *baharka* groupings of castes' (ibid: 16). Thus, when visiting other villages in Kullu and when receiving visitors in their own village, the people of Malana 'appear to act as if they belonged to a caste apart from all others' (ibid: 48). This division also determined marriage practices: through the practice of village endogamy they further insulated themselves against social contacts from the outside.

Perhaps most strikingly, the Malanis saw physical contact with all outsiders as highly polluting. Visitors to Malana, including Rosser, 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 certain village footpaths⁸. Any transgression of these rules was punishable by a stiff fine. 'Malana stands alone: independent, autonomous, "different" in the eyes of Kullu people, and certainly in the Malanis' own estimation' (Rosser 1952: 477)

The result of this physical, linguistic and social isolation was that Malana 'has been left more or less to govern itself' (Rosser 1956: 33). The Rajas of Kullu avoided interfering in the affairs of Malana and recognised it as a place of sanctuary for criminals and offenders bent on escaping punishment. This continued to be the case during the period of British rule: 'the village has been largely ignored by the Government and is rarely visited by Government officials from Kullu' (Rosser 1952: 477). 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

8 This last rule was relaxed in Rosser's case after the first few months (Rosser 1956: 49).

autonomy quite distinct from that of other Kullu villages which have all been drawn into the official administrative system of Government departments and courts' (ibid: 477).

Having spent several months in the Kullu valley prior to proceeding to Malana, Rosser had collected accounts of how the people of this isolated settlement were viewed by their neighbours.

It is certainly true to say that the Kullu villagers regard the Malanis as a group which stands outside the main stream of social life in Kullu; a group which is strange, foreign even, and without parallel in other Kullu villages however remote.The Malanis are regarded as wild and uncanny by their Kullu neighbours.... In many of their customs they appear backward and 'jungli' to the much more sophisticated Kullu villager (Rosser 1956: 45).

An example of this wild or 'jungli' behaviour was provided by the Malani insistence on barter. When engaging in trade, 'they will never accept money for wool, and often not for *ghi*, but go from village to village in the hope of getting their customary barter rates for these articles'. This 'obsessional adherence to tradition' according to Rosser led to behaviour which was often glaringly 'uneconomic' and encouraged the view among 'the more sophisticated Kullu villagers' that the Malanis were excessively backward and primitive' (ibid: 112). Malana was regarded as a throwback to an earlier more primitive age that existed before the rise of regional states and prior to the possibilities of market exchange.

Though Rosser describes the Malanis' 'excessive primitiveness' as being the cause of much amusement in the village of Kullu, he caught in this laughter a hollow note (1952: 482):

Garbled, exaggerated accounts of some of the more dramatic and esoteric aspects of Malani culture are a frequent feature of Kullu conversation whenever the enigma of Malana is under discussion. It is apparent that the attitudes of Kullu villagers towards the Malanis are a mixture of humour and mocker[y] (because of their "backwardness") and awe and even fear (because of their close association with a powerful god, their strange customs, and their almost uncanny group solidarity) (Rosser 1956: 45-46).

Throughout Kullu, Malana was (and remains) known as ‘the home of “a different kind of people”’ (Rosser 1952: 477).

If the people of Kullu saw the inhabitants of Malana as distinct from the main stream of social life, the feeling was undoubtedly shared by the Malanis themselves. Topographically, culturally and politically, Kullu represents for Malana its external environment; Rosser wrote of the term ‘Kullu’ being used by the Malanis to refer to the world beyond their valley:

The people of Malana have developed an almost fanatical sense of difference, of village cohesion and of intense group loyalty. All who do not “belong” are treated with virulent suspicion and even contempt. There is not the least doubt that on reaching Malana from Kullu, one enters a cultural “atmosphere” quite distinct from, and sharply contrasted with, that of Kullu. This distinction can perhaps be best conveyed by stating that with Malana, though it consists only of one village, one is dealing with a self-contained tribal society as opposed to the village or folk society of Kullu (1956: 50, emphasis in original).

This was the Malana that Colin Rosser sought permission to enter. The reasons for wanting to visit were obvious for: ‘as a unit of study for the anthropologist it emerges from its background with singular clarity’ (ibid: 49-50). But, singular clarity or not, it was a unit that was resistant to being subjected to ethnographic study.

Knowing it was impossible to obtain the use of a Malani house, Rosser had devised a plan to build a small hut on the edge of the village. After negotiation with the Malani council lasting nearly three months, Rosser succeeded in obtaining a plot of land. This site was levelled and three trees cut down and turned into planks. At this point, the more conservative faction within Malana decisively denied him permission to reside within the village⁹. Realising that any attempt to settle in Malana could only succeed ‘at the cost of alienating at least half the village’ (ibid: 457-458), Rosser spent the worst of the winter in neighbouring Jari. He wrote: ‘The

9 Visiting Malana in September 2013 I was told that a group of Malana people had deliberately destroyed Rosser’s half-built hut.

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’ (ibid: 455).

From his wintry tent at the foot of the Malana glen Rosser was able to reflect on what he had learned in his first six months in Kullu. The resulting account was submitted for publication in *The Economic Weekly*. In it he writes of the intense solidarity and isolation of the people of Malana reflected in feelings of equality and similarity. His census of the 119 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 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). It was this caste and economic homogeneity that allowed the village to function as a ritual and political unit (Rosser 1955: 72).

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

While the caste divisions found elsewhere in Kullu were not present in Malana, there did exist a complex social system that divided the village territorially into two separate areas of habitation: Dhara Behr and Sara Behr. Of these two it was the more conservative Sara Behr that had objected to Rosser’s attempt to reside in the village. Between the two *behrs* was 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’ (ibid: 477). At one end of the *harchar* was the main temple of the village; in the centre of the square a

sacred stone represented Jamlu; and at the far end of this main temple square the village council met.

Rosser's 1952 article in *The Economic Weekly* provides a detailed description of the village council. Decisions over village matters were made by three permanent hereditary post-holders (collectively known as the *mundie*) and eight elected elders (called *jestas*). Following discussion all decisions would be put before an assembly of all the household heads (*chakars*) who could express their approval or disapproval. With decisions needing to be unanimous Rosser was witness to a good deal of 'procrastination, compromise and modification'. Where unanimity was not reached the case was either dropped, shelved or when urgent, the council agreed 'to put the problem directly to Jamlu himself through a particular procedure involving an ordeal by poison, a goat being substituted for each party to the dispute' (Rosser 1956: 320)

Though from the outside Malana might appear strongly unified, Rosser identifies a constant internal struggle for power between the *Karmisht*, *Pujara* and *Gur*¹⁰ based on the dual territorial division between the two *behrs* (1952: 482). Rosser theorised that the major motive force of the Malani system of government was to achieve and maintain equilibrium between structurally equivalent segments: 'the Malanis have evolved a political system characterised by a strong centralised authority inseparably associated with an arrangement of balances between homogenous, structurally equivalent segments' (1956: i).

This egalitarianism is functionally related to the subordination to Jamlu. In so far as the god is seen as possessing a monopoly of power - which is delegated to human office-holders - the struggle for power is severely limited and restricted. It expresses itself rather as a struggle to maintain equality. In essence, this is what happens in Malana. Integration is achieved, as it were, through putting political power beyond the reach of individuals and groups. None can dominate because all are dominated [by Jamlu] (ibid: 513-514).

Stressing the extreme homogeneity of Malana and its separation from

10 Rosser describes these three positions as being, respectively, that of Jamlu's estate agent, priest and oracle (1956: 342).

the wider world, Rosser describes not a village but a traditional 'self-contained tribal society' (ibid: 50). In emphasizing the tribe above the village, mechanical over organic solidarity, Rosser stood apart from the intellectual and geographical concerns of the new wave of sociologists and anthropologists studying India's villages in the 1950s. While his contemporaries were interested in social transformations demonstrated through the interaction of caste and class, Rosser's account is unconcerned with the kinds of changes brought about by incorporation into wider economic and political systems. While Rosser detailed the mechanical solidarity of 'tradition', others were exploring new approaches to a rural India that was rapidly becoming 'modern'. With its clear structural definition, economic self-sufficiency, political solidarity, and strong sense of ritual integrity, Malana appears as a prime example of the 'little communities' of rural India that Marriott identified as disappearing in the face of foreign and urban influence (1955: 172). Some might see the people of Malana as existing on one side of a great divide: their insistence on barter marked them out as economically primitive; their tradition of village governance an unsophisticated throwback. The account forwarded by Rosser however may be read another way. Somewhat unfashionable compared to the fast-moving inter-connected circles of 1950s ethnography, Rosser's depiction of Malana now seems to locate it squarely within the kind of stateless space that has more recently been most prominently charted by Willem van Schendel and James C. Scott.

As a critique of 'classical' area studies and a way to draw attention to the neglected areas and societies that exist on the periphery of states and civilization, the concept of Zomia was placed firmly on the map by Williem van Schendel (2002). Outlining a new framing for Asian studies, van Schendel's Zomia extended from the highlands of Vietnam across the South-East Asian massif and into the Himalayas as far as Afghanistan. 'Borderland societies' in Zomia and elsewhere are characterised as being socioculturally, linguistically, economically and politically distinctive; 'borderland people', according to Baud and van Schendel, feel 'ethnically and emotionally part of another, nonstate entity' (1997: 227 and 233).

Of the wave of borderlands studies inspired by this rethinking of state and non-state space perhaps the best known is the 'anarchist history' of upland South-East Asia forwarded in Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Scott argues that hill peoples cannot be understood in isolation but only

relationally and positionally with respect to larger and more powerful political entities (2009: 32). He describes Zomia as a splinter zone made up of peoples who have fled from oppressive regimes of state control and created a variety of stateless societies. While Scott's Zomia extends no further than the highlands of South-East Asia, Malana seems very similar to its independent and egalitarian communities residing in 'non-state space'¹¹.

To Scott *all* aspects of 'tribal' communities can be seen as predicated on resisting forms of state intrusion and control. Highlighting the history of 'deliberate and reactive statelessness' in South East Asia, Scott reverses conventional narratives of incorporation into regional, national and international economic and political systems. Following Pierre Clastres (1974), he argues that 'stateless peoples' are not unaware or without contact but rather have made a decision to remain separate from forms of political organization beyond the level of the immediate community. Anarchic and acephalous, these communities practice forms of 'escape agriculture' whose slipperiness offers little purchase to the grasping hands of state power with its regimes of tax- and slave-collection. From this perspective tribal communities are not leftovers from a primitive past but have made a political decision to actively rebuff a state they view as predatory and extractive. In exploring these dynamics, Scott has rescued hill peoples from assumptions of stasis, primitivism, essentialism, and isolation and given them 'voice, agency, and rationality' (Lieberman 2010: 336).

Could Malana's unique culture be understood as an example of ethnogenesis, a collective identity deliberately engineered in response to a particular political problem? Maintaining and emphasising a separate and bounded tribal identity against efforts to force them to assimilate, the Malanis would appear to be, to use Scott's term, 'barbarians by design' (2009: 8). Given their egalitarianism and their explicit rejection of the logic of the state and the market, could Malana be another example of the kinds of anarchistic societies identified by Graeber (2004: 23-29)? A closer examination of Malana does not bear out some of these stronger claims about 'anarchistic' borderlanders, but the village and its inhabitants can indeed contribute to broader understanding of the complexity of

11 Pointing to the area as a haven for refugees from oppressive states Shneiderman (2010) asks whether Zomia might be extended into the Central Himalayas. Extending this point the contributors to David Gellner's 2013 edited collection look specifically at borderland lives in the new sub-region of 'Northern South Asia'.

the politics of geographical and social spaces which the state finds hard to reach. Borderlands, according to Baud and van Schendel, are not a simple zone where 'us' stops and 'them' starts. They can also be a space of agency, the realization of which can have 'unintended and subversive consequences' (1997:212). There is more to Malana than meets the eye, as Rosser was to discover.

A Himalayan Mystery

Like many of his contemporaries Colin Rosser submitted an initial account of his research for publication in *The Economic Weekly*. 'A Hermit Village in Kullu' was first published in 1952 and, three years later was gathered with other similar accounts in M.N. Srinivas' edited survey of *India's Villages* (1955).

In his introduction to *India's Villages* Srinivas makes clear that some of the articles contained within 'are tentative in the extreme' often being 'written...while the field-work was still in progress' (1960: 1). Later findings, cautions Srinivas, may 'modify, and even occasionally contradict' the information collected earlier (1960: 1). It becomes clear, reading Rosser's 1956 doctoral thesis, that his initial account (and only published one) was based on only a very limited acquaintance with the village. Rosser arrived in Kullu in 1951; his attempt to build a hut on the outskirts of Malana failed in the autumn of that year. As the piece in *The Economic Weekly* was published in May of 1952 it could scarcely contain any information gathered by Rosser while actually residing in Malana. Absent from the collection brought together by Srinivas, an introductory note from the Editor of *The Economic Weekly* makes it clear that, though 'the author [Rosser] spent the past year in carrying out a field study in Kullu' he was yet to commence his planned 'intensive analysis of the village about which he writes' (i.e. Malana). Instead the 1952 account that made its way into *India's Villages* via *The Economic Weekly* is based on Rosser's negotiations with the Malanis, on archival and official accounts and, in particular, on the views of the Kulluis' among whom Rosser lived before moving to Malana. In short, Rosser's 1952 account of the hermit village of Malana was produced at a distance and drew largely on the opinions of people living elsewhere in Kullu. There are direct parallels here with some of the key criticisms of Scott's work on the 'anarchist' highland communities of South East Asia, namely that it doesn't direct significant

attention to the views of the actual people it discusses (Lieberman 2010: 336; Karlsson 2013: 323). If there is an absence of Malani voices in Rosser's initial account, his 1956 doctoral thesis more than compensates.

Having had his initial request rejected, Rosser persevered in his efforts to reside in Malana. Abandoning the attempt to construct a wooden house, Rosser petitioned the assembly to be allowed to return after the winter and live in a tent. Eventually, in the spring of 1952, the Sara Behr faction relented and Rosser finally gained permission to pitch his tent on the edge of the village. As we shall see, the months of actual residence in Malana caused Rosser to reassess his earlier depiction of the Malanis as economically isolated and politically separate. Reading Rosser's doctoral thesis it becomes clear that there was more to Malana than he revealed in the article in *The Economic Weekly*. While the 1952 account describes how outsiders viewed the people of Malana, his 1956 thesis outlines why it suited the Malanis to be viewed that way.

In the opening chapter of his thesis Rosser provides a geographic description of Kullu which divides cultivation in the valley into three zones each associated with particular types of village:

- a) The *bal* or low-lying lands of the Beas valley which contains irrigated land suitable for rice cultivation. Although it is rare to find villages of more than 100 households, still, villages of up to 150 households are sometimes found in this zone.
- b) The *manjhat* or 'mid-zone' in which two crops are produced annually usually of wheat and barley. Villages are smaller than in the *bal* but larger than those in the *gahar*.
- c) The *gahar* or 'highland zone': 'The smallest villages of Kullu – mere hamlets of 10-15 households – are found perched high on the ridges... at altitudes of up to 9000 feet. Here land is scarce, poor in quality, difficult to till because of the steep slopes, and the altitude permits only one crop annually – and even this is imperilled by the possibility of late snow during severe winters. In these difficult conditions, it is not unnatural that these high villages should be extremely small in size' (1956: 9).

Herein lies the mystery that Rosser sets out to solve. At 9000 feet Malana is one of the highest Kullu villages and would be expected to reflect the same difficult ecological conditions experienced by the upper villages

of the *gahar*. Yet with the 112 households¹², Malana compared very well in size with the most favoured villages situated on the fertile *bal* land. The solution to the riddle of Malana's elevated existence, unmentioned in Rosser's *Economic Weekly* paper, is solved in his doctoral thesis. Here Malana is revealed to be considerably less self-sufficient and more outwardly turned than its image might suggest.

In feudal times the various Rajas of Kullu would make gifts of *muafi* or revenue estates to those who they wished to reward or appease. Alongside the nobles of the Kullu Rajas' court, these gifts might be extended to village gods. The more powerful a god, the more the Rajas would seek to buy his or her favour. Noting this system in his Settlement Report of 1874, J.B. Lyall wrote that by granting these lands as endowments, the Raja 'divested himself of his lordship and proprietorship. The cultivators thenceforward paid rent and did service in respect of such lands to the shrine and not to the Raja' (1874: 157). Since the deity of Malana village was believed throughout Kullu to be particularly powerful (and exceedingly vengeful when angered) it made sense that 'all the lands in the Malana glen were granted to Jamlu by the Rajas' (ibid: 34-35). Furthermore Jamlu was made overlord of a very considerable quantity of different types of land in villages scattered in the main Beas valley and in Wazeeri Rupi to the south (Rosser 1956: 77). The grant having been made, the Malanis were entitled to collect revenue on behalf of Jamlu. Known as *kar*, a share of the rice and barley¹³ grown in the tributary villages would be carried back to the god's treasury at Malana. Rosser immediately recognised this as 'a vital contribution to the Malani economy... and is a partial explanation of [how] though one of the highest villages in Kullu, Malana is also one of the largest' (ibid: 84).

The Malanis were well aware that without this *kar* and the accompanying 'offerings' they would be faced with a profound economic and social crisis.

The economic necessity to the Malanis of this external food supply serves to reinforce in their minds their almost fanatical belief in

12 The 116 households of the 1952 survey had, by now, been revised down: Rosser (1956: 48) records a total of 112 households of which 109 were Kanet, 1 Julahas (weavers) and 2 Lohars (ironsmiths)

13 Rosser estimates the total *kar* to be worth in the region of Indian Rupees (INR) 4256 at Kullu market weights.

the power of the god, to magnify their dependence on him, and to confirm their conviction that they are the only real devotees of Jamlu, enduring under his divine protection.... The Malani obsession with the god, their complete submission to what they believe to be his will, and their fear of, and dependence on, his power are facts which are unquestionably fundamental to an analysis of the Malani social system. This fervent religiosity is woven into the whole fabric of Malani society. The study of Malana is essentially the study of the cult of Jamlu: they are one (ibid: 85).

The major revelation of Rosser's doctoral thesis was his detailed description of the kinds of elaborate practices that ensured the collection of rent on Jamlu's *muafi* land:

Twice a year, the Malanis descend in force from their mountain stronghold to collect the *kar* or rent due from the tenants. The strong force of Malanis, some 60-80 in number, is greatly feared by the villagers concerned who have come to dread these bi-annual visitations. The Malanis,.... invade – this is scarcely too strong a term – the village, intimidate the villagers, insist on being supplied with free meals for several days.... and also, and this is the significant point, demand that the *kar* due shall be measured in a special *basaju* which they bring with them (ibid: 78-79).

Significantly this *basaju* was twice the normal size; this allowed the Malanis to extract double the amount that was owed to them.

The arrival of a large party of wild-looking Malanis, jabbering in a foreign tongue, the envoys of “the most powerful” of all the Kullu *devtas*, is a somewhat awe-inspiring event for the small Kullu village which may consist of only fifteen to twenty households. The villagers undoubtedly consider the Malanis as being wild, uncanny and often dangerously mad (a fiction which the Malanis appear to encourage as it aids them in the collection of the maximum rent) (ibid: 80).

It seems that in the 1950s (and indeed for a long time prior) Malana was not isolated or self-sufficient but depended on a very particular form

of engagement with the wider world. Recognising Malana's isolation as 'a fiction', Rosser establishes its 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 and different. Jamlu both symbolised Malana's separation and made it possible.

While there is much of value and interest in Clastres' and Scott's approaches, they arguably exaggerate the extent and form of separation of communities that place themselves outside of state control. Olivier de Sardan (2005: 79) reminds us to be wary of stereotypes of uncaptured, restive and rebellious peasants, their resistance to external authority and their supposed refusal to enter modern markets. At the core of Scott's analysis is the binary distinction between the valley and the hills. This division largely corresponds to the delineation between state and nonstate spaces. Scott's major revelation in *The Art of Not Being Governed* is that highland and lowland are not separate zones but zones that are defined and produced by their opposite. On initial viewing it might appear that, like all good Zomians, the economic and social institutions of the Malanis were premised on a desire to keep the state away. However, it is inadequate to define Malana in Clastres' terms as a 'society against the state'. Read against the evidence of Rosser's second account it becomes clear that the relationships that hill people develop with lowland state societies are more complex and ambiguous than Scott or Clastres allow. Forsyth and Michaud argue for a more refined reflection and a more dynamic understanding of the relationships between (marginal) local subjects, (global) market forces, and (national) states: 'people on the margins do not just get onboard and accept... modernity, but, rather, use their agency to maintain direction over their lives and livelihoods' (2011: 3). To Scott the entire societal design of hill populations can be understood as an act of resistance aimed at keeping oppressive lowland states at a distance. Another way to look at Malana (which is interconnected with but distinct from the hill populations described by Scott) is that the entire social and cosmological structure of the village was designed to facilitate the extraction of tribute from neighbouring villages. Strong social boundaries allowed the people of Malana to engage to their advantage economically and politically with the wider society.

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 Malanis had maintained their separation was vulnerable to the sorts of changes occurring 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).

There is no doubt that the abolition of Jamlu's *muafi* would [also] 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 (ibid: 86-87).

What Rosser chose to do with the information he had gained about such a vital component of the Malani economy would seem to more than justify the initial suspicions held by the people of Malana:

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 (ibid: 86).

In *The Art of Not Being Governed* Scott specifies a time limit for statelessness.

Since 1945, and in some cases before then, the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies – railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraphy, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology – so changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states, so diminished the friction of terrain, that my analysis largely ceases to be useful. On the contrary, the sovereign nation-state is now busy projecting its power to its outermost territorial borders and mopping up zones of weak or no sovereignty (2009: xii).

In newly independent India, state-promoted development would be expected to transform their political, economic and social isolation and assimilate Malana notionally into a national mainstream. Rosser arrived in Malana precisely when this very hinge in its history was being opened. The situation he described is one where a degree of separation from the state was still possible. The next section updates the story and asks how this cohesive and fiercely independent community reacted to new systems of government and how the dynamics of Zomia are challenged by new technologies of control.

Hermits or hippies? The economics of fictive isolation.

In 1995 a batch of Malana Cream entered into Amsterdam’s prestigious Cannabis Cup was adjudged to be one of the two finest hashish smokes in the world¹⁴. ‘Bush Doctor’ in his *Smokers Guide to Amsterdam* describes Malana Cream as boasting ‘an unusually soft and smooth inhale, with flavors like a chocolate biscuit’ that yield ‘an excellent body high, without dopey feelings,’ and leaving ‘a bit of a numb feeling on the back of the

14 <http://www.thctalk.com/cannabis-forum/showthread.php?3987-High-Times-Cannabis-Cup-Winners-1988-2007&s=2467d3ba6d82c763fd0e5ef044696175> and http://www.therealseedcompany.com/products.php?product_id=15, both accessed 2nd August 2015.

throat that has you reaching for a cool bevie from the juicebar'¹⁵. It would seem that the village of Malana was, by the mid-1990s, operating as part of the global economy. It is noticeable that in his thorough review of agricultural production in 1950s Malana at no point does Rosser mention cannabis (1956: 89-92).

Over the last sixty or seventy years return visits and fresh studies of sites first described in the 1950s have provided long-term perspectives on political, social and economic changes in Indian village life. Offering often critical insights into anthropologists' methodological approaches, suggesting how these contribute to particular understandings, and how they have changed over time, such studies open windows into the intellectual and disciplinary history of Indian anthropology and sociology. Rosser and his depiction of Malana seems a good way to explore and examine ideas about tradition and modernity both in rural India and in the discipline of anthropology. The remainder of this article offers not to study this particular village again but to revisit Rosser's work in order to reflect on the nature of change experienced in Malana and the capacity of the people of Malana to respond to change.

In September 2013 I approached Malana village by the same route that Rosser covered on foot over sixty years previously. It is no longer necessary to make a day's walk from Jari to reach the village; a jeep-able road carved into the walls of the Malana valley comes within an easy stroll to it. The road was built to support a series of hydro-power projects that tame the waters of the Malana River. To reach Malana I had to pass through a check-point stationed outside the offices of the Forest Department, and a police post.

Today's visitors do not need to request permission to enter Malana, nor are they required to remove leather shoes and belts at the edge of the village. However the strict pollution taboos remain in evidence: a series of signs posted on the Harchar and the Temple warns that attempting to touch or photograph the building will result in an IRS 2500 fine. Physically touching the residents of Malana or any of their possessions is similarly to be avoided.

The basic layout of the village is still apparent, with the Harchar and

15 <http://www.outsideonline.com/adventure-travel/asia/india/Bad-Trip.html> accessed 2nd August 2015.

temple square separating the Sara Behr and Dhara Behr sections. However, the appearance of the village has altered since the 1950s: many of the old wooden houses¹⁶ 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. There is a government school, and the large red building in the centre of the village had been built by Malana's Pradhan¹⁷. A series of seven guesthouses now ring the village, which seems significant given the difficulties Rosser had when wanting to live there. These cheap hotels cater to backpackers who are drawn to Malana by the mountain scenery and the air of exotic mystery that pervades the village. And, of course, there is the added attraction of a cheap and plentiful supply of high quality hash.¹⁸

The commercial cultivation of cannabis was adopted by the people of Malana at some point in the late 1970s. 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. Malani accounts tell of an Italian by the name of 'Glenu'¹⁹ who took up residence²⁰ in the village and taught them how to make *charas* using the 'hand-rubbed' technique to draw resin from the plant by massaging each flowering leaf between the palm and fingers. While some of this cash crop is sold directly to tourists much is exported across India and overseas.²¹

Societies without a state are commonly classed as societies based on subsistence economies (Clastres 1989: 190). Involvement in international trade may thus seem contrary to Malana's reported earlier self-sufficiency

16 In November 2008 a devastating fire tore through the Sara Behr half of the village consuming the central temple and the Pujara's house.

17 The Panchayat and the Pradhan are part of the modern state's system of village government and operate quite separately from the village council, the Harchar and the Munde.

18 I am grateful to Chappe Negi (of Negi's Himalayan Adventures) and Lars Brodholt (University of Bergen) for their observations on contemporary Malana.

19 'Glenu' has offered his own account of the introduction of cannabis cultivation to Malana: Galeno 1998. *Pensiere Grotteschi: riproduzione totale o parziale vietata*. See also: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/italian-suspect-in-drug-trade-arrested-near-malana/706920/>. Accessed 2nd August 2015.

20 The Malani people's rejection of outside authority and long tradition of providing sanctuary to criminals explains why foreigners such as 'Glenu' were able to remain undetected in Malana for such a long period.

21 http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-08-26/chandigarh/41454552_1_malana-cream-seeds-charas. Accessed 2nd August 2015.

and rejection of money as a medium of exchange. However, it need not necessarily be so. Parry and Bloch describe a tendency to postulate a fundamental division between non-monetary and monetary economies: 'this opposition gets elided with a series of other dichotomies – 'traditional' and 'modern', pre-capitalist and capitalist, gift economies and commodity economies, production for use and production for exchange – with money acting as a major catalyst of the 'great transformation' between them, or at least as a telling index of it' (1989: 7). This tendency is apparent in the way that Malana has been viewed by the people of Kullu, by the state in colonial and independent India, and by trekkers and tourists attracted to Malana by tales of this independent, isolated and mysterious village republic. In this view Malana's adoption of cash cropping might suggest a dramatic transformation from a relatively isolated 'tribal' community into the starting point of an international commodity chain. Against this, and accepting Scott's view of deliberate separation as a political choice, might an alternative explanation of economic change in Malana be forwarded?

Rather than viewing them as romantic isolated entities Scott recognizes that 'peripheral peoples had always been firmly linked economically to the lowlands and to world trade' (2009: 4). However, borrowing from Clastres, he saw their ability to take advantage of agro-ecological niches in trading with nearby states was accompanied by, even dependent upon, the ability to avoid subordination as subjects of the state (Scott 2009: 334. 24). I argue that although Malana's cannabis based economy has a global extension, it remains firmly rooted in key aspects of Malani culture and social organisation that would be immediately familiar to Rosser. Parry and Block are critical of the commonly held notion that money has 'an intrinsically revolutionary power which inexorably subverts the moral economy of "traditional" societies' (1989: 12). Certainly this does not seem to have been the case in Malana.

Anthropological approaches to exchange relations question the assumed divide between market (characterized by anonymous, short-term exchanges) and community (characterized by long-term associations and solidarities both real and imagined). Stephen Gudeman suggests that instead of a binary divide we should recognize the mutual constitution of overlapping realms of community and market, the up-close and the far-distant. 'In one guise, economy is local and specific, constituted through social relationships and contextually defined values. In the other, it is

impersonal, even global, and abstracted from social context'. Arguing that both of these realms are ever-present 'even the most market-driven actor – the national or global corporation – mixes the two realms and relies on the presence of communal relations and resources for its successes' (2001: 1-2). Earlier, based on Rosser's account, I described how the Malanis were able to engage with the state in particular ways. By maintaining an image of separation and backwardness they sought out advantage in negotiations. Might something similar be happening in the economic sphere?

Malana's cannabis economy is, of course, illegal²². The police post on the road down from the village is supposed to prevent the sale and transportation of cannabis resin. There is a widespread rumour throughout Kullu District that the people of Malana give bribes to corrupt officials in order to reduce disruption to the export of Malana's key cash crop. Even so, in the run-up to the harvest season each September, teams of police officers arrive in Malana and attempt to destroy standing fields of cannabis plants. I arrived in the village the day after one such raid had taken place. The response was that such police actions would not deter the villagers from continuing to engage in their illicit but lucrative trade. I was told that because everybody in Malana cultivated cannabis there was no possibility that the police would be able to destroy the entire harvest. Those families unlucky enough to have been targeted would have their losses compensated by others in the village. Most significantly - from the point of view of this article - was the belief among people in Malana that the police were afraid to attack the village because of the power of Jamlu²³. During visits police officers would be verbally threatened and such abuse might, on occasion, extend to physical violence. While recognising that such disruption might not halt an ongoing raid it was thought it would reduce the likelihood of future police interference. Police attacks on the cannabis crop were 'only for show' and not a serious attempt to disrupt production. That Malana continues to be recognised as 'different' and 'special' would seem to be confirmed by a senior district official's

22 The Indian government's 1985 Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act prohibits the production, manufacture, possession, sale, purchase, transportation, warehousing, concealment, use or consumption of *charas* (*cannabis resin*).

23 Rosser himself offers an oral account of a punitive expedition by the British which sees the invaders driven off by a swarm of angry bees sent by Jamlu (1956: 36).

description of the village as ‘India’s first independent village republic’²⁴ which was best regulated with a light touch. Malana’s egalitarianism, its hostile image and collective ritual and cultural unity under Jamlu persist in ways that underpin its economic system even today.

The continued existence of a communal and collective dimension in Malana’s economy suggests a successful integration of supposedly ‘traditional’ practices and ideologies into international systems of marketing and exchange. In the past the Malana’s economy depended on the extraction of *kar* from other villages around the Parbati and Kullu valleys. Now, though the direction of the raids is reversed, resistance to interference and hostility to external authority all work to sideline the state and allow cannabis to be cultivated. So too does the sharing of risk offered by widespread production and pooled compensation. Looking beyond ecological suitability, we might see cannabis cultivation as a niche activity made possible by the existence of a unified political collective able to establish and defend the space in which individual economic transactions take place. Though part of an international system of trade, in its illegality cannabis production belongs to an ‘alternative’ economy that fits well with Malana’s ‘alternative’ polity.

As we have seen, rather than isolated and remote, it is more plausible to view Malana as squarely located within wider social, religious and economic structures²⁵. Whether through the extraction of *kar* or the cultivation of cannabis, Malana’s prosperity was and is dependent on a selective engagement with certain external elements and a rejection of others. The suggestion of rejection of the wider (mainstream) culture paradoxically allows the people of Malana to function as an inalienable part of it. Malana’s counter *culture* is reflected in a counter *economy*, now as in the past. Rosser would not have known the term, but the Malani people might better be characterised as hippies than as hermits.

24 Personal communication. 16th September 2013.

25 Shneiderman makes a similar point about the Thangmi of Nepal who simultaneously situate themselves to make strategic and political claims on the state while remaining deeply committed to the ‘ungoverned aspects of their identity in cultural and psychological terms (2010: 292)

Searching for Utopia in Zomia

Arjun Appadurai identifies one of the most problematic legacies of western social science is its sense of a single moment that marks a dramatic and unprecedented break between the past and the present. It is a view that has been shown to 'distort the meaning of change and the politics of pastness' (1996: 3). While Scott questions the characteristics attributed to 'the traditional' highland society and 'the modern' lowland state to recognise the agency of the former, he does so in ways that arguably reinforce the binary between the two. Updating Rosser's work to take account of the altered context of the 21st century allows us to move beyond simple evolutionary notions of progress to see the culture of Malana not as an isolated leftover but a dynamic product of involvement with the wider world. The Malanis retention of their distinctive 'tribal' community identity should not be understood as static timeless tradition; but nor is it located simply in geographical space, whether state or non-state. Here we see that 'globalization is itself a deeply historical, uneven, and even localizing process' (ibid: 17).

Though Scott specified a time limit on the survival of Zomia, his own earlier works on infrapolitics and everyday resistance strongly suggest that the modernization process might be proceeding less effectively than its proponents forecast (Michaud 2010: 214). The Malana people's social distinctiveness has been reconfigured rather than effaced by change. The way the Malanis represent themselves to the outside world shows a sophisticated understanding of the symbolism of tradition, isolation and separateness. They deploy and strategically manipulate their image to encourage certain aspects of engagement but ward off threats of assimilation or the assertion of government control. Isolation is here not a social fact but rather a political strategy that appears to have changed little over time. As such, to borrow a phrase from Formoso (2010), the people of Malana are neither Zomian – in the sense of being uncompromising rebels – but zombies, unable to adapt. Whether through tourism or the trade in cannabis, Malana's engagement with modernity continues to be a communal and a creative process.

If the Malanis are not the pure Zomians of Scott's imagination, then what insights might Malana offer for understandings of the state - especially in its 'mature' form - that came into being after the Second World War? Does Scott's pessimistic view that new forms of governance

have finally allowed the state to penetrate Zomia ring true in Malana? In contemporary borderland regions it remains difficult to think of the nation state as the natural context and container for all social and political processes. Farrelly (2013) questions the need of states to project the technologies of control over 'unimportant hamlets, by the sides of little creeks, on lonely mountain passes' (ibid: 200). Against Scott's geographically uniform technologies of control he instead recognises a series of nodes of state power: '[I]n the political systems of contemporary Zomia there is a process of hardening the state in places that matter and withdrawing from places that do not' (ibid). To date, the contemporary state has, for whatever reason, opted not to impose its disciplinary power onto all aspects of Malani life all of the time. On the other hand at different times and with different motivations, the people of Malana have both accepted and rejected state interventions, made demands on the state and also sought to evade its discipline. In the upper Malana valley, as elsewhere, the dynamics of state society relations remain temporally and spatially variable.

Scott borrowed the term Zomia from the Dutch historian Willem van Schendel but applied it in a rather different way. While Scott's work draws attention to the culture of non-state societies existing in montaigne Southeast Asia, van Schendel used the notion of Zomia to explore how areas are imagined and structured with centres and peripheries. In doing so Van Schendel promoted a reconsideration of the inter-relationships of borderlands as part of dynamic processes that span local, regional and global levels. This article updates Rosser's description of a 'hermit village' to move Malana away from Scott's utopian vision of a non-state space to a more van Schendelian recognition of how the people of Malana negotiate multiple cultural, political and economic zones. Rosser's work shows the existence of a border between state and society to be a fiction that suited both the Malanis and the authorities in Kullu town. The temporal border suggested by Scott which placed a time limit on Zomia's existence is in fact highly permeable so that degrees of statelessness existed in the past and continue into the present day. However they do not necessarily exist in the same form. It seems highly likely that Scott's Zomians have been changed by contemporary connections beyond 'the border'. It is possible, however, that such engagements actually sustain rather than undermine the existence of non-state space.

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