

ANNUAL REPORT: HIMALAYAN MYTH & REALITY 2018 FIELD SCHOOL

Directors: Dr. Sonali Gupta-agarwal and Dr. Parth Chauhan



The Kahika Ritual, Kullu Valley

The Himalayan Myth and Reality Field school (HMRFS) commenced on July 15th with a total of 8 students. The first week was spent introducing the students to the valley, its culture in general and a blue print of the theory and methodology to be followed at the temple complexes at the field site. The students were initiated into a crash course in Hindi which included writing and phrases which helped them in forming bonds with the people of the valley. The students formed into teams and worked on two temple complexes each. At the temples, the students observed and conducted ethnographic interviews with the following: *Pandits* or priests of temples, *Gurs* or mediums of gods and goddesses, Drummers, Drum makers, Trumpet blowers, Trumpet makers, Families of priests, Families of mediums, Local villagers in the core area of the temple, Local villagers in the peripheral area of the temple and Youth. The students witnessed the following events and ceremonies: Local marriages, the road way processions of the deities, mediums channeling the deities on a regular basis, birthing ceremonies, naming the child ceremonies, daily prayer rituals at the temples and ancestral worship at the Palace in Kutlehar. The students learnt the following:

1. Tracing locations and paths for deity processions using GPS and other techniques.
2. Layering the paths onto GIS and Google earth.
3. Ethnographic information of transference of knowledge, stories and legends through oral tradition.
4. Drawing and digitizing temple layouts and floor plans.
5. Sedimentary log for understanding the geology of Kullu valley.
6. Film editing.
7. Archaeological & anthropological photography, non-invasive archaeological techniques and data analysis.

8. Principles of Himalayan sacred and secular architecture.
9. Theories forming the basis of historical, landscape and anthropological archaeology.
10. Basic Hindi conversation and writing.
11. An understanding of heritage management and community interaction with ancient sites in semi-urban areas.
12. Documentation of rituals and customs associated with archaeological temples and sanctuaries.
13. Art historical understanding of motifs and their meaning.
14. Understanding of mythical narratives through translated texts and art in temples.
15. Documentation of each motif found engraved in both stone and wooden temples.
16. Traditional Himalayan wood carving where each student engraved a block of wood with traditional motifs.
17. Documentation of each sculpture found engraved in both stone and wooden temples.
18. Uniform coding of data relating to motifs and sculptures across temples for comparison.
19. Statistical analysis of qualitative and quantitative data.

The data collected in the 2018 season is available on cloud and on an external hard drive to all students and team members. The student teams made four 10- minute films on the temples they researched. The films are available for viewing on a private YouTube channel. The films were presented on the last day at the Naggar castle (the former capital of the Kullu kings), where the people of the town were in attendance. The locals were excited and very happy to see how hard the students worked and made films on their heritage. The presentation of films helped strengthen community ties. The locals have expressed all support for such endeavors which helps them 1) understand their own history and culture 2) preserve their heritage. The 2018 Field School helped in shedding light on some research questions:

Was the hierarchy of gods and goddesses in the Kullu valley based on geographical location or something else? Preliminary research shows that there is a definite hierarchy of the three main gods in the Hindu pantheon, which goes beyond geography. However, the offshoots of the main god heads have a hierarchy which based on mythical and social narratives. The frequency of visits of a particular god/goddess to another god/goddess is also regulated by these narratives. The question of hierarchy whether geographical or social was addressed through location and paths of processions of deities on certain events during the monsoons. The location and paths were digitized using GPS app and then layered onto GIS and google earth. The data so collected for each of the temples is in our data base. It will be interesting to see whether such a pattern is seen in all the temples in the Kullu valley or only some of them. We also focused on transmission of myths and how we see their visual performance in architecture. Transmission takes place through oral tradition and performance of rituals around the visual narratives etched in sacred spaces. The repetition of these narratives with rituals allows the transmission of myths. One also witnesses myths being deliberately forgotten even though they are visually present and etched in sacred spaces. It appears these myths are taken away from circulation by disengaging them with ritual action and then deeming them lifeless with no meaning, Therefore, the idea of ‘forgetting’ is a tool used by those in power to camouflage certain narratives and the perpetuation of other narratives.

An increased use of Iron tools and ritual items seems to be focused in temples associated with the epic *Mahabharata*. The reason could be that the epic belongs to the Iron age (1500 BCE) when India witnessed an expansion of territories both eastwards and northwards due to the use of Iron implements. The use of Iron objects in the temples can be viewed as a consequence of the expansion and continued tradition of the epic age. Rituals where the medium channels the deity of the village is a common phenomenon in Kullu valley. These rituals seem to be

shamanistic in origin and run deep in the socio-religious fabric of the Kullu people. More needs to be documented and researched. In all, the 2018 field school has allowed the Myth and Reality project to gather a lot of interesting data and leads for future research. We hope to expand the research area and cover other temples in the area and do comparative research with our uniform coding system. We plan on continuing to have students make short films on their research projects to share with locals and friends.

In the near future, we plan on writing articles in the Journal of Anthropological Archaeology, Journal of Anthropological theory and method, and the Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research. We are presenting our research area in a forthcoming Himalayan state archaeology conference in November 2018.