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## Original Research Article

# Economy, culture, society and administration of Malanese tribe in the Himachal Himalaya

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### ABSTRACT

The Malanese tribe resides in a relatively remote valley in the Himachal Himalaya at an elevation of roughly 800 feet. The first British Region Magistrate of the erstwhile Kullu, Lahul, and Spiti district, A.F.P. Harcourt, looked into the existence of this tribe in 1868. Only a small number of social scientists have been able to thoroughly examine the way of life and culture of this tribe throughout the course of the past century. With barely 1,000 people and years of complete isolation, this tribe has established a distinctive communal and traditional structure and become accustomed to a form of government that can only be described as democratic. These folks make their living mostly on sheep farming and subsistence agriculture. The natives speak a unique language that is very different from the other local dialects spoken in the Kullu valley. They carried on growing some types of crops on foothill terraces for many years, prepared clothes using goats and sheep hair, and never be contingent on anything from the outside world to support their way of life. Due to the influence of increasing numbers of tourists from across India and outside, their outlook and way of life have already undergone certain changes recently. If this trend continues, it is thought that this tribe's distinctiveness and local culture may disappear within the next ten years.

## 1. Introduction

The upper Beas Basin catchment basin includes the little river Malana, which is situated in the Kullu district of the Himachal Himalaya. The Malanese are a group with a distinct cultural identity that inhabits a remote, high-altitude area of this river basin (approximately 8000 ft. or 2500 m.). About 130 years ago, when A.P.P. Harcourt, the District Magistrate of Kullu at the time, reached this mountainous region in 1868, the Malanese tribe, which only had 1,000 people, was investigated. At the time, Mr Harcourt was conducting a reconnaissance survey with the intention of creating the first Kullu district gazetteer. He was primarily a manager but also skilled in anthropological observation. Before publishing his account in 1870, he paid for this hamlet two trips between 1868 and 1870 and examined many aspects of their way of life and cultural traditions. Since then, countless anthropologists and environmentalists have visited this peculiar zone of ethnic life over a period of more than a century, but little has been learned about their society, culture, or economics as a result of their complete lack of interest in outsiders [1].

Following Harcourt, the renowned British anthropologist Colin Rosser travelled to Malana in the 1970s and 1980s and wrote a lengthy chapter titled "The Hermit Village" in his book *Indian Villages* about his experiences there. It never fails to astonish me how this little ethnic minority was able to create a completely distinct and autonomous cultural and sociopolitical framework within their own borders despite being isolated off from the adjoining Kullu valley areas and, consequently, from the rest of the industrialised world. In 1987, Doordarshan aired

a documentary about the village that Kullu resident Ramesh Pathania had made. In actuality, this was the first visual account of what was going on in the hamlet at the time, including its traditions, customs, and everyday life of its inhabitants [2]. The author made an effort to investigate numerous aspects of this Malay tribe during his action-packed fieldwork in 1988, 1989, and 1996 in order to fully understand the economy and culture of this ethnic group.

## 2. Access to the Malana village

The footpaths leading to Malana run through some of the most difficult terrain, including steep upslopes and dense woods. Malana has remained largely isolated from other Kullu valley villages. There are two possible routes that can be taken to get to Malana village from the potential transportation points: one starts going from the Kullu valley itself, via Naggar (2000 m), and then over Chanderkhani Pass (3500 m), for a distance of approximately 21 kilometres; other one must go from Jari (1400 m), situated in the Parbati river valley (a tributary of the River Beas), for a distance of approximately 8 kilometres.

## 3. Economy, culture and society of the Malanese tribe

The Malana settlement is located on a comparatively flat terrace at a height of around 8000 feet (2500 m) in the valley of the Malana river. This terrace measures roughly 600 metres in length and 400 metres in width. Schistose rock slabs and wood planks, typically made of Chir Pine, are readily available



local building materials. Thinner rock slabs are used to construct slanting roofs. The bulk of the huts are two-story structures, with the lower floor commonly used to keep their goats, sheep and other domestic animals or a place to store firewood obtained during the dry months in anticipation of the upcoming winter. Malana has roughly 70 dwellings and is split into two sections: the upper section, known as "DharaBerh," and the lower section, known as "Sara Berh." There is a very important open courtyard next to the major temple in the centre of the village, and leather shoes are not permitted inside [3].

The Malay people's economy is built on both sheep farming and subsistence cultivation. Agriculture serves as the primary source of income for the community and provides for about 70% of their requirements. Winter is severe and lasts for the bulk of the season due to high altitude. Thus, the growth season is limited to the months of May through September. There are roughly 40 hectares of agricultural land on a series of terraces surrounding the settlement, where the locals cultivate.

Between 4 and 10 kilometres from the main hamlet, there are three other temporary Malay communities where conspicuously extensive porches have allowed them to do periodic agriculture. These are the following sectors: (a) Thusko, which is situated on a mountain wall across from the Malana river channel and is about 4 km away; (b) Bekhli, which is situated about 3 km before the Malana hamlet; and (c) Kiksa (about 10 km upstream).



**Figure 1.** A view of the Malana village.

Some grain crops, specifically Kathua and Mandua, are used to make bread by extracting the blossom. By harnessing the controlled perennial flow of springs or stream systems,

flour is produced from these grains by Panichakki. The yield per acre isn't high enough since farmers lack advanced technological understanding. Red potato is the only produce that is grown here. Around a thousand people reside in this village, but there is not enough food produced there to feed everyone, therefore it is uncommon to see healthy people. People frequently rely on extra foods, such as honey, small wild fern weeds (tingri), and wild mushrooms. They occasionally consume goat and lamb meat as well, which they get from their herd of grazing animals [5].

The majority of the community's women labour in agriculture, including tilling the soil, sowing seeds, and harvesting crops. Males collect firewood, mushrooms, honey, and other items from the nearby woodlands. During the warmer months, several people relocate their goats and sheep to the higher altitudes just above the tree line at the pasture regions of the alpine meadow (May to September). They move from one level of the gassy meadow to another with all of their belongings, including their family, throughout these days of the year as they live a nomadic lifestyle. They return to the hamlet and their dwellings with herds of animals as winter approaches (by the end of September). They use the wool from their sheep and goats to produce a range of garments. Wool is the only substance used in the manufacture of their garments because they have long lived in isolation.

#### 4. Culture and society of the Malanese

The Malay people have a very ancient culture and lifestyle. The earlier researchers, including AFP.

Harcourt and Colin Rosser hypothesised that these individuals might be non-indigenous generation ancestors. Malay people frequently assert—of course without knowing who the great emperor was—that they are descended from warriors who battled alongside the Greek king Alexander thousands of years ago. According to some anthropologists, during Alexander's invasion of India in the fourth century B.C., a number of soldiers dispersed from the army and retreated to this most distant Himalayan region.

A mixed generation was created as a result of their capture of some native mountain ladies during their flight and before seeking final refuge in this isolated valley. However, a logical case for this viewpoint has not yet been made. Wood carvings of procession scenes of elephants and camels (animals never seen here) and statues of warriors wearing what look to be Greek army costumes on the main temple wall suggest that the people's ancestors may have come from somewhere other than this hilly area [6].

The Malay people are approximately 5' 8" inches tall on average. People of the same age group, both sexes are nearly the same height. Their health is underdeveloped, and they have long faces and a nose that is noticeably more protruded than the residents of the Kullu valley districts nearby.

According to Mr Harcourt's description of the Malanese more than a century ago, the eyes have a startled and terrified aspect, and the nose stretches over the vacillating mouth. This, along with the slender chin, gives the entire face a character of flexibility.





**Figure 2.** A view of the traditional dress of Malana village women.

Malays consider themselves to be GaelJanilu's subjects (Rishi Jamdagni in Hindu Mythology). All communal and household activities, like as prayer, feasts, marriages, and other rites, are carried out in line with the rules of this great God, whose word is conveyed through Cur, the village leader [7]. During the Sagrat festival, which is held in May and forces everyone to congregate in the courtyard to worship their god Jamlu, the neighbourhood celebrates. The Gur is in charge of organising the festivities. On one side of the centre courtyard, the great temple is home to priceless decorations and musical instruments including silver flutes, bugles, and big drums. On the festival day, the community forms a procession led by their Gur to the sacred tree (Jamlu's tree), which lies at the top of the hamlet, where a lamb is sacrificed to the God Jamlu by having its head hacked off. Following the ritual, the remainder of the day is devoted to a celebration that involves singing, dancing, and the consumption of bread and pig. The locals, who are God Jamlu's most ardent believers, claim that visitors are not permitted to enter the country with any leather items, including jackets, camera cases, shoes, or even belts for pants.



**Figure 3.** A group of Malanese ladies on the festival day of 'Sagrat'.

In Malay society, the system and marriage age are both remarkable. Even before women continue to perform all types of domestic and agricultural duties, they eventually find time in their busy schedules to get married at ages beyond thirty, when their youth is virtually over. However, male people typically get married significantly earlier, when they are under twenty. It is not unusual for a young man to marry a woman who is around forty years old. Both sexes independently select their life partners, and a straightforward wedding ceremony is performed in front of the local temple by giving the God Jamlu one rupee. Since they only reside in this one hamlet, it is obvious that marriage is still restricted to members of the same

community. This unusual marriage arrangement has two drawbacks: first, the birth rate is still very low in this hamlet, which slows the pace of population growth; second, the average life expectancy is still low in contrast to the districts of the adjacent Kullu valley. The Malanese have a heritage of making every piece of their clothing from animal hair, like wool, as was previously described. Women cover their bodies with a vibrant blanket-like covering called chadar while wearing woollensallowers and blouses. Additionally, they enjoy donning a variety of silver-colored necklaces and earrings. It's not uncommon to see women wearing up to fifteen earrings in each ear. Their shoes and slippers are made of grass and plants. Men also dress in body-hugging garments resembling pyjamas and kurtas and cover their heads with wool hats. The women wear the sombre grey plaids and circular brown caps, while the men dress just like the peasantry in Kuloo; however, The odd monk-like cowl of madder-brown fabric is evident here, as it is in other villages, and is haphazardly placed across the headpiece before being left to hang down the shoulders. Harcourt found many similarities between the Malay and the Kullu valley people in their clothing.



**Figure 4.** The Choutara where the members of Harcha assemble for decision making.

## 6. Administrative system in the Malana village

The Malana village has a particularly distinctive governmental structure because they have followed a democratic system ever since the dawn of time. Malana has a separate government that disagrees with the nation's right to self-governance. They never submitted to any administration from outside the hamlet, as Mr Harcourt noticed and noted in his book from the previous century [8]. According to certain social scientists who think there is a link between the Greek invasion and the genesis of the Malay people, this structure reflects the concept of the "City State," which even more than 2,000 years ago in Greece, the Greek people supported. The alternative to this notion exists as well, though. A number of small, independent, democratic, sovereign, states, and villages like Licchabi as well as Malla, are said to have existed in some parts of northern India when Alexander first arrived there more than 2000 years ago. These states may have had an impact on other businesses at the time. A pyramidal system of administration governs the Malay people, with the Cur—the equivalent of the Lama in Tibetan society—at the top and acting as the final decision-maker. Below Cur are listed the spiritual leader or Pujari and the administrative head or the Kardar. The parliament, often known as the Harcha, is in

charge of this state. Jathera (the Upper House) and Kore are its two homes (the Lower House). The Harcha is then formed by the four representatives from each of the two village portions, Dharaberh (the upper segment) and Sara berh (the lower segment), respectively. Without a doubt, our legislative system is still developing. A member of the Harcha may only hold office for a total of four years, and members are chosen by village agreement with the approval of the Cur. Both houses are under the management of The Cur, God Jamlu's agent.

Malana's local court, the Harcha, has historically ruled on all disputes. In addition to settling disputes among the people, Harcha's responsibilities also include deciding the sort of grain crops that should be farmed the next year as well as organising the annual festival schedule. The members of Harcha get together for these events on the substantial Choutara platform in the central courtyard under the direction of the Cur, Kardar, and Pujari. Robbery and murder are unheard-of crimes, and disagreements among the locals typically centre on the number of sheep and goats, especially before winter when the shepherds bring the animal herds down from the alpine fields. Issues are sent to the Lower-House of the Harcha and, in the worst event, the Cur, whose decision cannot be appealed, if the parties involved are unable to reach a mutually acceptable conclusion. The system of judging takes on a lot of interest when the Cur must step in. A lamb or a goat must be brought

by each of the two arguing parties to the Khorona Supreme Court, which is just another open courtyard around 200 metres away from the Choutara and has two sizable Pine trees standing on one side. Following their poisoning, the animals are tied to the two trees. A feast with a complete dinner will be prepared for the entire community as well as a present for the God Jamlu at the temple for the claimant whose animal passes away first. This person will then be found guilty.

## 7. Language spoken by the Malanese

The Malay language is distinct from the languages spoken in the Kullu valley regions due to its distinctive phonetic identity, which sounds more like crying or yelling. Since there is no native script for this language, there has never been a reading or writing culture among the populace. However, it is amazing to think of how a small group of just 1,000 people, who spent generations in isolation, were able to develop a sophisticated language. Kinnauri and Lahuli, which are spoken in the Lahul and Spiti districts of Himachal Pradesh, have been demonstrated to share some similarities with Malanese, despite the claims of many linguists that the Malanese language is entirely different from languages spoken in other areas of the state (spoken in Kinnaur district). Some words have a Sanskrit-like pronunciation. Table 1 lists a few illustrations of the Malay language's vocabulary.

**Table 1.** Several illustrations of Malay language terms..

English	Malanese	English	Malanese	English	Malanese
Mother	Ya	One	Id	Rice	Lar
Father	Ba	Two	Nish	Wheat	Jhand
Son	Chhah	Three	Shum	Barley	Chahg
Daughter	Chumee	Four	Pooh	Milk	Kheerang
Man	Laro	Five	Nahan	Butter	Boohur
Woman	Lari	Twenty	Beech Nabya	Honey	Was
Mine	Aka	One hundred	Nabeeha	Bread	Hod/ Hora
Tour	Toa	Forest	Reeyas	Cooked rice	Ful
I	Goo	Fire wood	Shing	Cloths	Gasa
While	Chhog	Water	Tee	Beautiful	Sovilas
Yes	Hoe	Cow	Hooch	Wool	Cham
No	Mae	Sheep	Khas	Ice	Chous

## 8. Present trend of change of the Malanese society and culture

Due to their full isolation from the outside world and the deeply established ideals of cooperation among the inhabitants, Malana has maintained its original social, history and cultural structure nearly fully intact for hundreds of years. However, recent years have seen a faster-than-expected pace of change. Since the late 1800s, the summer months have seen a massive

influx of visitors, including foreigners. The Malanese were extremely hesitant to accept anything from the outside globe before it. However, they then changed their thoughts and discovered how to purchase various foodstuffs and materials for attractive clothing from markets outside the Kullu valley. The Government of Himachal Pradesh has opened a primary school in Malana that solely offers instruction in Hindi, in addition to connecting the community's homes with electricity

wires and giving each household a free power supply. In 1987–1988, the Malay people made every effort to prevent the construction of the electric poles but ultimately gave up. Within the next ten years, it won't be a surprise if Malana transforms to the point where it resembles any other village in Himachal Pradesh's Kullu district.

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