Sacred Liquor and Sacred Power in the Ritual Authority and Cultural Identity of the Kinnaura Tribe

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Abstract

This study examines the role of sacred liquor in sustaining ritual authority, indigenous governance, and cultural identity among the Kinnaura tribe of Kinnaur District, Himachal Pradesh. Adopting a qualitative, exploratory research design, the study integrates ethnographic observation, four in-depth case studies (Gur, Pujari, Matas/Mali, and Kardar), and thematic and interpretative modes of analysis. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation during DevVachan (trance sessions), and documentation of ritual procedures involving locally brewed barley liquor (Ghanti/Chhang). The findings reveal that sacred liquor functions as a ritual technology of sacred sovereignty rather than as a profane intoxicant. Thematically, it emerges as a symbol of divine vitality, a seal of ritual authenticity, a medium of collective participation, and a marker of ethnic identity. Interpretatively, its structured sequence of offering, consecration, authorization, and hierarchical distribution materializes divine legitimacy and reinforces institutional authority within the deity-centered governance system. The differentiated roles of the Gur (spiritual sovereignty), Pujari (ritual precision), Matas/Mali (communicative regulation), and Kardar (administrative governance) demonstrate a layered indigenous political-theological structure in which sacred liquor symbolically seals decisions and sustains procedural order. The study concludes that sacred liquor in Kinnaur is institutional, embodied, regulated, and governance-linked. It operates as a culturally embedded medium through which ritual authority, moral order, and collective identity are continuously enacted and reproduced, illustrating a distinctive Himalayan model of sacred sovereignty resilient amid processes of modernization.

Key-Words: *Sacred Liquor, Ritual Authority, Indigenous Governance, Kinnaura Tribe, Cultural Identity*

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Introduction

In Himalayan societies, ritual authority and political organization are often deeply intertwined, and Kinnaur presents a distinctive example of a deity-centered governance structure where spiritual legitimacy, social regulation, and institutional hierarchy operate as an integrated system. Within this framework, sacred liquor (locally known as *Ghanti*) occupies a significant yet understudied position. Rather than functioning merely as a consumable substance, it is embedded within ritual procedures, trance performances, temple administration, and collective decision-making processes.

Ghanti and *Chhang* are both home-brewed alcoholic beverages used in ritual life; the two terms are frequently applied to the same barley, millet, rice-based ferment. Chhang often referred to as the "Beer of the Himalayas," this cloudy, mildly alcoholic drink is made by fermenting grain mostly made of rice. *Ghanti* locally referred term for all type of alcohol among Kinnaura.

With the aid of four detailed case studies, the *Gur* (religious medium), the *Pujari* (priest), the *Matas/Mali* (ritual intermediary), and the *Kardar* (temple manager), this research takes a qualitative, ethnographic and interpretative approach to understand the ways in which the sacred

liquor manifests divine sovereignty, legitimizes ritual authority, organizes indigenous governance, and consolidates collective identity. The study combines thematic and interpretative approaches for positioning sacred liquor in a broader political-theological frame where sacred power is embodied, regulated and institutionally organized.

The local traditional institutions are in the process of negotiating continuity and change in the context of modernization, migration and socio-economic transformation in Kinnaur. The aim of this study is thus to gain insight not only into the ritual value of sacred liquor, but also its function as a cultural anchor to hold indigenous governance and ethnic identity together during present day transition processes.

Literature Review

Ritual Authority and Indigenous Governance in Himalayan Societies: Research on the Himalayan societies has always pointed to the close association between the ritual elite and indigenous modes of governance. The important role played by the village deities in controlling the social life in Kinnaur was mentioned in early colonial ethnographies like Journal of a Tour through Part of the Snowy Range of the Himala Mountains by James Baillie Fraser (1820) and an Account of Koonawar in the Himalaya by Alexander Gerard (1841). The Pakistan State Gazetteer Vol VIII Shimla Hill States also highlighted that there were parallel political authorities in the form of deity institution in Bushahr State.

The anthropological studies like Kunawar by Duetser (1939/1996 in reprint) and The Kinnaurese of the Himalaya by Raha and Mahato (1985) clearly brought out that governance in Kinnaur is not distinct from ritual sovereignty. In this system, three men—Gur (oracle-medium), Kardar (manager) and Pujari (priest)—rule as a group, granting divine authority and determining what is proper and wrong in the community, deciding on who is right or wrong in any arising conflict. According to Thakur et al. (2025), sacred authority in Kinnaur is a decentralized, cooperative and integrated system of governance, and the divine mandates or instructions given through DevVachan are used to manage the social behaviour and determine the legitimacy. So in Kinnaur the authority of ritual is not just symbolic religion per se, but indigenous political system.

Daniela Berti (2009) presents the phenomenon in a form of theoretical consolidation in Divine Jurisdictions and Forms of Government in Himachal Pradesh, in which the deity institutions function as legal entities, as territorial sovereignties and as moral authorities. This is consistent with the general sociological theory of community power structure (Hunter, 1953; Oommen, 1970) and elites in general (Domhoff& Dye, 1987) which indicate that community ritual elites represent a localised sacred polity.

Even after modernization and state penetration, as demonstrated by the recent scholarship of Bhagat and Dogra (2024), and Negi (1987, 2024), forms of governance based on deification of deities are resilient as indigenous political structures. Based on the concept of authority transformation (Mendelsohn, 1993; Huntington, 1965), the researchers conclude that authority remains in the Himalayas, but it changes instead of dying out, and is legitimate because of the continuity of culture.

Sacred Liquor in Ritual Contexts: Alcohol in the Himalayan societies is not just a substance to be consumed, it is a ritualized medium that exists within a ritual exchange system, a cosmology and power dynamics. Joshi (1911) and Majumdar (1960) reported earlier that locally brewed liquor (ghanti, chhang, sura) was used as a ceremonial drink during life-cycle events and worship of deities in Bushahr and Kinnaur.

In Kinnaura religion sacred liquor is presented to their deities as part of a festival, while functioning in a trance (DevVachan) and during oath taking ceremonies. According to Rahul Sankrityayan'sKinnerDesh Me, ritual drinking serves as a corporeal reassertion of the presence of the divine, as well as social cohesion. According to Thakur et al. (2025), ritual liquor is also a performative substance, which is used to invoke and validate divine presence. The provision and use of sacred drink, therefore, serves as a midway between power, authority and cultural continuity.

Ritual alcohol is ethnographically consistent with classic concepts of myth and ritual (Lang, 1887) and social cohesion (Gluckman, 1963). Sacred liquor in many situations in the Himalayas provides a sign of fertility, reciprocity and divine vitality. As Sax 1990; 2009 shows ritual substances and alcohol affect the relationship between humans and the deities, which helps to uphold moral order and justice.

Therefore, in Kinnaur, sacred liquor is a ritual technology of power: it sacralizes power, fixes decisions, enacts the will of the community, it brings into being the sanction of the gods. Alcohol is not necessarily impious intoxication, but a sacralized embodiment, a shared cosmological belonging.

Ritual Performance, Embodiment, and Cultural Identity: In Kinnaur, ritual power is performative and body-based. Through the Gur's trance, music with rhythmic patterns, liquor etc., are offered in enactment of divine sovereignty. Based on symbolic anthropology, Sax (1990) and Berti (2009) contend that ritual enactment legitimises by being embodied.

These findings of the Psychological research studies conducted in Kinnaur clearly show that in the socially disadvantaged and polyandrous population of the region, there is a lot of community cohesion and resilience because of the shared cultural structure (Negi&Zinta, 2011, 2012). This research indirectly contributes to the anthropological theories that argue participation in rituals is important for social integration and collective efficacy. Zinta, Negi, (2010) also illustrate the role of social identity and efficacy in relation to cognitions and social behavior of the tribal youth.

An important aspect of Ortner's theory of ritual is the connection between the cosmic order and the social order, which is established through performance in Himalayan communities. Holy beverage is used to achieve altered state of consciousness for trance communication in Kinnaur which serves as an empowering tool to enhance the charm and divine mediation of the Gur. This is in keeping with general anthropological debates on legitimacy and moral authority (Pardo 2000). Thakur et al. (2025) highlight the importance of the performative aspect of ritual; ritual is not just an expression of the religious but one of enacting social order in Kinnaur. Embodied trance, sacral drink offerings and collective participation creates visibility of cosmic authority and its socially binding elements. Thus ritual functions as a cultural text that constantly reinforces identities.

Structurally, ritual practice maintains a group identity. To this end, Srinivas (1980) and Krishna (2002) point to the ritual networks which create “active social capital” for members, and a sense of solidarity and mutual obligation. Thus, sacred drinking ceremonies are assertions of Kinnaura ethnic identity and tribal difference, particularly when such difference is under threat from outside cultural influences.

Continuity and Change in the Kinnaura Religious System: Early ethnographies and colonial records depict a relatively isolated ritual polity with dynamic adaptation according to current scholarship. Bajpai (1981) and Negi (1987) refer to the change of political leadership and increasing involvement of the state. Still dispute

resolution and moral arbitration is a job of the deity institutions.

The system of Devta and Devi over the years has transitioned to a hybrid system to coexist with democratic mode of governance as found in literature (Bhagat&Dogra, 2024; Negi, 2024). Conceptualizing the formal and informal governance (Pur, 2007) and the transformative model of authority (Mendelsohn, 1993), some have proposed that ritual sovereignty coexists with the state apparatus' bureaucratic dominance.

Although some of these rituals involving sacred drinks are sometimes derided and condemned in current health discourses, they remain as indicators of authenticity and continuity. Not rejecting them, but instead they demonstrate cultural resilience – conforming to form while preserving the symbolic substance.

Collectively, in the literature, sacred liquor stands out as a part and parcel of ritual power and the local governance of Kinnauri people. Deity institutions manifest themselves in the form of juridical, moral and political power institutions, from colonial gazetteers to contemporary anthropological research efforts. Sacred liquor is a ritual material that comes to represent the divine right, the legitimized authority and the collective identity.

As put by Thakur et al. (2025), ritual liquor is another performative substance, as the presence and validation of the Divine is called into being. A connection to power, authority and culture then is the making and consumption of sacred beverages.So, sacred power in Kinnaur isn't wholly theological nor entirely symbolic, but is instead institutional, performative, and materially performed in the use of ritual substances like alcohol. Such practices illustrate that in the Himalayas sacred sovereignty and community identity have been intricately intertwined, resulting in a broadly unique model of governance—unique to the Himalayas—between people and land.What is unique in the Himalayas, is a model of indigenous governance that is shown in the continuity of these practices, where sacred sovereignty and community identity go hand in hand.

Research Gap and Novelty of the Study

Previous studies on Himalayan deity-governance systems (Berti, 2009; Raha&Mahato, 1985; Thakur et al., 2025) have indicated that the ritual functionaries act as parallel institutions of authority, and psychological studies from the same region have demonstrated resilience and identity among the Kinnaura communities (Negi&Zinta, 2011, 2012; Zinta et al., 2010). But this literature has typically treated sacred spirits as a background ritual detail rather than an object of sustained empirical analysis. No study has to date systematically studied the material mechanism of the sacred liquor itself, its offering, consecration and hierarchical distribution, as a way of legitimising and communicating ritual authority across differentiated institutional roles. The study fills that gap by centring an ethnographic case-study investigation of Kinnaura governance on the analytic category of sacred liquor, and by building its argument on a clear distinction between participant testimony and researcher interpretation. This focus is the novelty of the present study in relation to previous scholarship on ritual authority in the Himalayas.

Local traditional institutions in Kinnaur are negotiating continuity and change amid modernisation, migration, and socio-economic transformation. This study therefore aims to understand not only the ritual significance of sacred liquor, but also its function as a cultural anchor that holds indigenous governance and ethnic identity together during present-day transition.

Objective

To examine the role of sacred liquor in sustaining ritual authority, indigenous governance, and cultural identity within

the Kinnaura tribe of Kinnaur District, Himachal Pradesh.

Methodology

Research Approach: The study is a qualitative, exploratory, and a descriptive type of study. It would be most suitable to employ a qualitative approach that will enable the research to capture depth and context of ritual authority, symbolic meaning, embodied performance and indigenous governance. A ritual approach and indigenous institutional analysis are interwoven with ethnographic approach and case study method, thought by interpretative phenomenology to understand the ritual alcohol practices in the socio-religious structure of Kinnaur.

a) Ethnographic Approach: The study is conducted through the depth of interaction that has been maintained with the ritualists and temple institutions of selected villages namely, Village Kapla *(Garokus/Gur*), Village Koti (Pujari), Village Sapani (*Matas/Mali*) and Village Morang (*Kardar*). Using the ethnographic method to study ritual practice, one can observe the ritual practice in its own living context and understand the understanding of sacred liquor as part of lived religious practices. The study engages in close relationships and interactions with the participants, and draws out indigenous meanings of ritual authority and governance.

b) Case Study Method: The main empirical level of the study is based on four detailed case studies: *Gur, Pujari, Matas/Mali and Kardar*. Through this approach, the issue of role differentiation within indigenous governance systems, embodied authority within ritual contexts and the control of alcohol in rituals can be closely explored. The case study method does not seek to be statistically generalizable, but rather is concerned with going deeper into a context with analytical richness.

c) Study Area: The study is carried out in Kinnaur District of Himachal Pradesh in the Western Himalayas. The community under study is the Kinnaura tribe which is a Scheduled Tribe. The region has been chosen because of its long tradition of governance with a focus on deities, the presence of well-defined temple structure and the control of ritual alcohol consumption. These qualities contribute to Kinnaur's status as an appropriate and important place to investigate sacred liquor, ritual authority and indigenous governance in the context of each other.The fieldwork for the present study was conducted from 15 July 2025 to 25 July 2025.

*d) Sampling Technique:*This study uses a purposive sampling technique. The selection of the participants was based on their ritual authority positions, hereditary positions within the temple institutions, and active involvement in ritual performances. This approach guarantees the selected informants have experiential and institutional knowledge that is pertinent to the research goals.

e) Sample Size and Data saturation: The primary sample included four key informants, the *Gur,* the *Pujari*, the *Matas/Mali* and the *Kardar,* along with other informants, as appropriate, in order to include the perspective of continuity, change and generational. The number of four roles in the sample was deemed sufficient for the purposes of this study, as this was the complete complement of ritual-authority differentiated roles recognised in the governance of Kinnaura temples. Each case was evaluated for data saturation based on the point when no new themes emerged concerning the informant's role and the role of sacred liquor for that informant, or their associates (secondary informants). Participant observation also involved being invited to *DevVachan* (trance sessions), participation in deity processions, alcohol offering, and festival organisation, which provided opportunities for triangulation of the data generated in the interviews.

Participant observation included attendance at *DevVachan* (trance sessions),

deity processions, alcohol offering rituals, and festival organization.

f) Tools of Data Collection: The primary tools used for data collection are semi-structured interview schedule, observation checklist. These tools facilitated the systematic recording of the use of sacred liquor, the ritual procedures, the institutional status and the symbolic significance.

g) *Credibility* -Triangulation (comparing the information from the interviews with the information gained from the participant observations and secondary informant interviews). These measures are to ensure the credibility of the interpretative conclusions drawn in the Results and Discussion.

h) Data Analysis: The study employs thematic and interpretative, modes of analysis. Thematic analysis identified recurring themes such as sacred sovereignty, ritual embodiment, alcohol as a sacred medium, indigenous governance structure, and continuity and transformation. Interpretative analysis focused on uncovering the symbolic meanings of Ganti, trance performance, and ritual hierarchy. Institutional analysis examined the division of ritual authority, administrative structures within temple governance, and interactions between indigenous institutions and state systems.

i) Ethical Considerations: In this study, researcher has been ethical considerations by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and respecting cultural.

Results

1) Thematic analysis: Thematic analysis was conducted by systematically coding interview narratives, participant observation notes, and ritual documentation. Recurring patterns were identified across the four case studies (*Gurotus/Gur, Pujari, Matas/Mali, Kardar*). Interpretative analysis was then applied to uncover deeper symbolic meanings embedded within ritual practice, sacred liquor offerings, trance performance, and institutional authority.

Through a cross-pollination of both methods, the study went beyond a descriptive mode to consider sacred liquor as a ritual technology of governance and of embodied legitimacy.

a) Sacred Authority and Divine Legitimacy

Participant perspective. Across all four cases, ritual authority was described by participants as divinely sanctioned rather than individually possessed. P1 (Gur) stated:

"Main kuch nahi bolta. Devta bolte hain. Log mujhe nahi, Devta ko sunte hain." ("I do not speak. The deity speaks. People do not listen to me; they listen to the deity.")

P2 (Pujari) similarly emphasised:

"Mandir ki maryada Devta ki maryada hai. Agar vidhi galat ho jaye, to ashubh hota hai." ("The temple's discipline is the deity's discipline. If the ritual procedure is incorrect, it becomes inauspicious.")

Researcher interpretation. These statements are read here as reflecting a theme of sacred authority in which legitimacy is attributed to divine embodiment rather than to the individual. On this reading, the Gur's body functions as a ritual instrument through which cosmic authority is expressed, and P2's account suggests that legitimacy in Kinnaur is understood locally as procedural and sacred rather than bureaucratic, deriving from correctness of ritual performance rather than from formal office alone.

b) Ritual Embodiment and Trance Authority

Participant perspective. Participant observation during *DevVachan* sessions recorded intense bodily enactment — tremors, rhythmic movement, and altered voice patterns. During one trance session, P1 (Gur) declared:

"Devta naraz hain. Gaon ko ek jut rehna hoga." ("The deity is displeased. The village must remain united.")

P3 (Matas/Mali) explained the accompanying use of liquor:
"Sharab pehle Devta ko chadhai jati hai. Tabhi baat shuru hoti hai." ("Liquor is first offered to the deity. Only then does the consultation begin.")
Researcher interpretation. Read together, these accounts suggest that trance performance dramatizes moral order, with the Gur's altered state serving as a visible enactment of sacred power. On this interpretation, sacred liquor (*Ghanti*) offered before trance functions not as intoxication but as consecration — a ritual threshold substance marking the transition from secular to sacred space.

c) Sacred Liquor as Ritual Medium

Participant perspective. All four cases distinguished ritual alcohol from recreational consumption. P2 (Pujari) clarified:
"Yeh nashe ke liye nahi hai. Yeh Prasad hai." ("This is not for intoxication. It is sacred offering.")
P4 (Kardar) added:
"Mandir ki sharab alag hoti hai. Iska hisaab hota hai." ("Temple liquor is different. It is accounted for.")
Researcher interpretation. Thematically, across these accounts liquor emerges not only as a sacred substance in its own right but as one that, in this reading, represents the presence and vitality of the deity within the ceremonial space; is treated by participants as a marker of ritual validation, associated with the correctness of ritual activity; functions as a medium of collective participation, in that villagers contribute to and receive it through a fixed distribution system; and, in the researcher's interpretation, can also be read as a symbolic marker of ethnic identity, invoked by participants to claim continuity and distinctiveness for Kinnaura culture amid social and modernising change. On balance, the researcher's interpretation is that *Ghanti/Chhang* functions here as a ritual medium of legitimacy: it authorises action, validates authority, and draws participants into a shared sense of cosmological belonging. This interpretation is offered as the study's analytic reading of the pattern across cases, rather than as a claim made directly by any single participant.

d) Indigenous Governance Structure

Participant perspective. Across all four cases, clear institutional differentiation pointed to an organised indigenous governance system. P4 (Kardar) remarked:
"Devta ka kaam sirf dharmik nahi hai. Zameen, faisle, sab mandir se jude hain." ("The deity's work is not only religious. Land matters, decisions — everything is connected to the temple.")
Researcher interpretation. In the researcher's reading, the Gur represents spiritual authority enacted through trance and divine mediation; the Pujari is responsible for ritual precision and correctness in temple worship; the Matas/Mali regulates communicative procedures during divine consultation, providing order and legitimacy to ritual dialogue; and the Kardar oversees financial administration and institutional governance of the temple system, supporting its stability and accountability. P4's statement is interpreted here as confirming that deity institutions function as parallel governance systems, consistent with indigenous institutional analysis. The researcher further interprets sacred-liquor offerings preceding collective decisions as symbolically marking communal consent and reinforcing institutional authority, though participants did not use this specific language themselves.

e) Continuity and Transformation

Participant perspective. All participants expressed concern about generational change. P1 (Gur) reflected:
"Aajkal ke bachche shehar jana chahte hain. Gur/Mahi banana aasan nahi." ("Nowadays children want to go to cities. Becoming a Gur is not easy.")
P2 (Pujari) added:
"Padhai zaroori hai, par parampara bhi zaroori hai." ("Education is necessary, but tradition is also necessary.")

Researcher interpretation. Thematically, these accounts suggest that modernisation introduces tension between continuity and aspiration, even as ritual structures remain resilient. The researcher's interpretation is that sacred-liquor rituals function as continuity anchors, stabilising identity amid socio-economic transformation — a reading offered as an analytic inference rather than a statement made by participants themselves.

2) Interpretative Analysis

Interpretative analysis moves beyond thematic coding to examine symbolic structures embedded within ritual practice, as read by the researcher against the case material described above.

a) Alcohol (Ghanti) as Materialised Legitimacy. Sacred liquor is not merely consumed: participant accounts and observation both indicate that it is first offered, sanctified, regulated, and distributed hierarchically. This sequence can be summarised as: Offering → Consecration → Authorisation → Distribution. The researcher's interpretation is that, through this sequence, liquor comes to function as a material embodiment of divine sanction.

b) Embodied Authority and Moral Order. Observation suggests that the Gur's trance is not spontaneous but a socially structured performance, with sacred liquor preceding and marking ritual activation. The researcher interprets this embodied sequence as one through which cosmic order is made socially visible.

c) Ritual Hierarchy and Structured Power. The four-case comparison suggests a layered governance model, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1*Layered Governance Model: Role, Authority, and Relation to Sacred Liquor*

Role	Form of Authority	Relation to Sacred Liquor
Gur (Garokus/Gur)	Charismatic–divine	Consecrated medium of trance
Pujari	Ritual–procedural	Sanctifier of offering
Matas/Mali	Communicative	Regulates ritual sequence
Kardar	Administrative	Regulates distribution/accountability

Table 2*Summary of Themes, Description, and Illustrative Evidence*

Theme	Description	Illustrative Evidence
Sacred authority and divine legitimacy	Ritual authority attributed to divine embodiment rather than the individual	P1, P2 statements on divine speech and procedural correctness
Ritual embodiment and trance authority	Trance as structured, visible enactment of sacred power	P1 trance declaration; P3 on pre-trance liquor offering
Sacred liquor as ritual medium	Liquor distinguished from recreational alcohol; treated as sacred offering	P2, P4 statements distinguishing temple liquor from ordinary drinking
Indigenous governance structure	Differentiated institutional roles forming a parallel governance system	P4 on the temple's role in land and community decisions

3) Integrated Analytical Interpretation: The thematic analysis and the interpretative analysis, when integrated, reveal that in Kinnaur sacred liquor serves as a key ritual tool by which the sovereignty of the divine can be realized and socially acknowledged. It formally offered, consecrated and hierarchically distributed, it legitimizes embodied ritual authority, particularly that of the Gur and other temple functionaries. Its controlled movements around during ceremonial

occasions shape the organisation of indigenous government by symbolically creating and terminating decisions, strengthening the roles of authorities and maintaining order in procedures. At the same time, the process of taking part in the consumption of sacred liquor is a way of reinforcing collective identity through the reaffirmation of common cosmological belief and ethnic distinctiveness within the Kinnaura tribe. These practices provide stabilizing cultural anchors, continuity, and perpetuation, all while enabling adaptive transformation, in the context of modernization and socio-economic changes. So, sacred liquor is not just a profane intoxicant, but a medium of power that is part of a wider indigenous political theology – a system that links spirituality, governance and cultural reproduction.

4) *Analytical Conclusion*: Analysis of the four case studies using themed and interpretative approaches show that sacred liquor in Kinnaur is a simultaneous process that operates at multiple levels which are interconnected, namely institutional, symbolic, embodied, regulated, and governance-oriented. Institutionally it is contained in the formalised hierarchy of the system of gods; symbolically it represents the vitality and sanction of the gods; embodied it is involved in the trance performance and ritual enactment; regulated it is controlled by the established procedural norms; governance-linked it is participated in the decision-making and moral regulation in the community. Its ritual utterances, transomatic representations, vertical hierarchies of offerings and the management of sacred liquor by temple officials make sacred liquor a systemised technology of sacred authority. Thus the study upholds its central argument that sacred liquor in Kinnaur is not only a material substance but as a culturally situated medium, it is constantly produced, reproduced and legitimated in the socio-religious life of the Kinnaura tribe.

Discussion

Among the kinds of deities venerated in the villages, apart from religious figures, they play an important role in maintaining social discipline as is earlier noted by Fraser (1820) and Gerard (1841). The present work adds to this comprehension by empirically demonstrating the role that sacred liquor plays in this deity-governed power structure as a material legitimating device. The results agree with the perspective of Berti (2009) in which institutions of god are considered as jurisdictions and territories; the ritual drinking of alcohol is a way of reinforcing the moral order and sealing communal decisions. Thus ritual authority in Kinnaur is not only a symbolic form of religiosity, but is also an indigenous political system as suggested by Raha and Mahato (1985) and Thakur et al. (2025).

The study is also a manifestation of theories in anthropology associated with ritual embodiment. Sax (1990, 2009) has emphasized the role of ritual substances as a mediator between the human and godly, and as part of this mediation, the moral order is strengthened. This is what the trance dancing and the consecration of Ghanti/Chhang of Gur demonstrates. Sacred liquor is not intoxicating, but is used to “activate the ritual,” to create sacred time and space from common time and space. This is a reflection of the classical renditions of myth and ritual (Lang, 1887) and Gluckman's (1963) conception of ritual as a means to social cohesion. The results are suggestive of the way in which devotional speech, when delivered in Vachan by the Lord, becomes socially binding, particularly when the sacredness is materialized by the presentation of sacred objects, to which the sacred sovereignty also pertains.

Furthermore, the results align with the knowledge of the distinction of the institutional system of indigenous governance. The hierarchical arrangement of the roles of the Gur, the Pujari, the Matas/Mali and the Kardar are similar to

the multi-leveled structure of community power identified in other sociological studies on community power structure (Hunter, 1953; Oommen, 1970) and elite organization (Domhoff& Dye, 1987). The way in which the Kardar manages temple resources, such as sacred liquor, shows the interaction of ritual power with managerial accountability and supports Berti's (2009) hypothesis about the way in which deity institutions are structured political entities. The flow of sacred liquid is strategically managed in this hierarchy, which extends the institutional boundaries and legitimizes processes.

The study results are also very comparable with the research on resilience and social cohesion in Kinnaur. Negi and Zinta (2011, 2012) point to the psychological strength and mutual efficacy of socially disadvantaged populations in this area, which is based on common culture. This current analysis tentatively validates in the light of ritual involvement within the framework of the exchange of the sacred liquor as a way of cultural integration and identity reinforcement as argued by Srinivas (1980) and Krishna (2002). Sacred liquor transforms into a symbolic and social glue as means to cement a feeling of belongingness in the face of the pressure of modernization.

The issue of continuity and transformation can be paralleled to the research on adaptation of authority in rural India. Building relationships with state institutions (the past) (Bajpai 1981, Negi 1987, 2024) and formal and informal governance (Negi 1987, Pur 2007) are said to be relationships that are connected to decline, but the study of Kinnaur reveals that the relationship between ritual sovereignty and state institutions do not lead to its decline, but to adaptive resilience. In fact, as Mendelsohn (1993) and Huntington (1965) have noted, under contemporary stresses authority systems don't just disappear. While the attitudes towards sacred liquor rituals may evolve over time, they provide an important symbol of authenticity and continuity of culture.

Theoretical Implications. These findings extend existing theory on Himalayan ritual authority (Berti, 2009; Sax, 1990, 2009) by proposing sacred liquor specifically rather than ritual performance in general — as a distinct material mechanism of legitimacy, worthy of consideration alongside trance and speech as a channel through which divine sanction is enacted.

*Practical Implications.*For local institutions and policymakers engaging with Kinnaura communities, the findings suggest that public-health or regulatory approaches to ritual alcohol use should distinguish clearly between recreational and ritual consumption, since conflating the two risks undermining practices that participants themselves describe as central to governance legitimacy and cultural continuity

Conclusion

The sacred liquor in Kinnaur is not only an item used in rituals but is an entity of sacred power as a part of the indigenous governance. Trance, ritual hierarchy, and institutional roles are the way in which it embodies its creation of divine legitimacy and ritual authority. Sacred alcohol is an expression of continuity of culture and collective identity and it embraces newer changes. Thus, it is an integral part to the political/theological matrix of the Kinnaura tribe for which politics of spirit, politics of government and politics of cultural sustainability are inextricably linked.

Limitations of the Study

The study has been done on a small sample size and limited case study, and due to lack of access to some of the sacred rituals. It relies more on an oral account and memory, and is frames for interpretation. Furthermore, social desirability bias might be present, especially with respect to attitudes towards the legitimacy of rituals and modern change.

Statements and declarations

Ethical Considerations: In this study, researcher has been ethical considerations by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and respecting cultural.

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