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Social Legitimacy vs Perceived Formal Legal Recognition: A Quantitative Study of Deity-Based Justice in Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

The local deity institutions in HP still have meaningful roles in the life of a community that go beyond worship. This study throws light on social legitimisation and perceived formal legal recognition of deity-based justice among selected communities of Kullu and Shimla districts. The research design employed was quantitative and data used were primary data which were collected by using a structured questionnaire for 1140 respondents. Descriptive statistical analysis, cross tabulation and Pearson's Chi-square test were used to analyse data. The findings indicate strong community perceptions of deity institutions as custodians of social order, providers of informal justice, preservers of traditions, and regulators of community behaviour. Deity decisions also receive substantial community acceptance, although perceptions of transparency are comparatively less consistent. In contrast, perceived formal legal recognition of deity decisions is considerably weaker, with substantial uncertainty among respondents. Significant district-level differences were observed across the dimensions examined, with generally stronger positive perceptions in Shimla than in Kullu. The study demonstrates a clear distinction between the social legitimacy of deity-based justice and respondents' perceptions of its formal legal recognition. The study concludes that deity-based justice continues to operate as a socially accepted customary form of authority alongside, rather than as a substitute for, the formal judicial system in the communities studied.

Keywords- Deity-Based Justice; Informal Justice; Legal Pluralism; Sacred Authority; Social Legitimacy; Perceived Formal Legal Recognition; Traditional Governance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Local deity institution is an important part of the social organization and cultural life of the State of Himachal Pradesh. In many rural societies the power of the village deities is not restricted to worship, rather it is firmly rooted in the daily socio-cultural interactions, practice and social structure as well as mechanisms of social control. Local deities are identifiable to certain communities and lands, and their power is manifested in the formal institutional structures of ritual specialists, temple personnel, community and customary activities. In spite of the proliferation of modern administrative and legal institutions, deity institutions still play a very important role in controlling the life of the community. This being so, the religious practices related to local deities are applicable to the research and analysis not only of Culture and Religion but also on local production and maintenance of Authority and Social Order (Panchani, 2016; Thakur, 1997).

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In the Western Himalayan region especially this interaction between the sacred and the governance is important. The deity institutions, in the past and in the present, had the links with territorial authority and community affairs in Kullu. The institution of the goddess, the *gur*, the *kardar* and the *rath*, offer avenues to interpret and communicate the divine to the community (Berti, 2009a; Mahajan, 2023). These arrangements are examples of deities having powers other than sacred circumstances. It can be used to join the community decision-making process and shape perceptions of community members in regards to their responsibilities, acceptable behaviour, and relationships with other community members.

The most significant expression of this has been the part played by the local deities in the settlement of disputes. Where there is a social power component to deity institutions, personal, family, or group disputes can be referred to the deity via ritual consultation, possession, oracles, etc., as acceptable means of participation in the community. The result of the decision made by the deity can be followed by the affected community and can include reconciliation, ritual obligations, compensation and others social sanctions (Pirta & Ranta, 2007). The working of deity-based DR is thus dependent on the elements of religion, acceptance of the community, nature of the moral obligation to a deity, and social pressure. Likewise, deity consultations are possible for things that have gone wrong, to settle disputes among parties, and to restore social and moral norms, but the grounds on which the deity's judgment is assessed is very different from the formal court (Berti, 2012).

This ongoing acceptance of this practice is an important question in modern India: What can be its social legitimacy and legitimacy as an alternative to formal justice? This question is even more salient when tensions arise between state law and other normative orders, such as customary and religious norms, and community norms. The scholarship on legal pluralism has shown that social actors can legitimise and accept norms other than those set by the state, which have not been created solely by the state (Benda-Beckmann & Turner, 2018). Religious and customary rules can also be in place next to formal law, as was the case in India, where a complex relationship between community-based authority and state law can emerge (Parashar, 2013).

The simultaneous presence of deity-based justice and formal judicial institutions brings up a pertinent question about the nature of legitimacy in the current rural society: How is a mode of justice both accepted in the community and different from and less strongly perceived as being formally recognised by the state judicial system? A response to this question needs to distinguish two aspects that are often combined: social recognition of the authority as legitimate in the eyes of the public; and formal recognition as regards law. The present study, therefore, examines whether there is a parallel perception of formal legal recognition of deity-based justice from the community and if the perception of formal legal recognition differs between Kullu and Shimla.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Sacred authority and local deity institutions

There is a body of existing literature that has already confirmed that the institutions of the local deities in the western Himalayas are not merely religious centres. Thakur (1997) had recorded the influence of myths, rituals, beliefs and village deities on social and cultural life of the Himachali. Deity rules also affect our daily social, moral, economic, political and environmental behaviours, as demonstrated by Panchani (2016). Such evidence suggests that the sacred operates in and through social institutions, or through institutionalized sacred authority, and is not limited to individuals' religious convictions. The institutional and political aspects of the deity authority are more evident in Kullu. Berti (2006, 2009a, 2009b) explores the nature of divine bureaucracy, the jurisdiction of territories, political leadership and the connection between deities and local political institutions. Inspired by this, Mahajan (2023) theorizes Kullu deity institution as an institution of government where the deity, *gur, kardar, rath*, and community together form an institutional field of government. The gur becomes an important medium of communication of the divine resolution, and *rath*, the divine agency, becomes visible to the community and within the territory.

2.2. Deity-based justice and social regulation

A second body of literature focuses directly on dispute resolution and social regulation. Pirta & Ranta (2007), through six case studies from Shimla district, demonstrate that deity institutions can mediate conflicts involving villages, families, and individuals. They found that, in their study, those who accepted deity decisions were able to re-establish social relations but those who disobeyed were to receive sanctions like the rift between social and physical relations. Consultations with temple are also described by Berti (2012) as an alternative forum for arbitration and judgment—where wrongdoings are judged as much as legally as through the lens of the social, ritual and moral order. Finally, there are indications in the literature that deity-mediated justice does not always take place in a uniform manner. This can be through possession, oracular speech, ritual consultation and other local processes of determining and settling the truth. Sax (2009) focuses on ritual healing and social justice in the broader context of religious institutions in the Himalayas and Sharabi (2019) looks at the agency accorded to deities in the Western Himalaya. These studies can explain how a deity decision can be quite powerful even though it may take a rather different approach to making a decision.

2.3. Legal pluralism and the question of recognition

The distinction between legal and social legitimacy is found at the very heart of the literature on legal pluralism. The concept of formal legal recognition and social legitimacy is central in the literature on legal pluralism. Benda-Beckmann

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& Turner (2018) suggest that legal pluralism draws focus to the negotiation and collision of state and non-state normative orders and the possibility of people recognizing non-state normative orders. The study by Parashar (2013) demonstrates that religious and community-based norms are not necessarily precluded by, or subordinate to, state regulation; it also introduces issues of equality and the implications of recognizing non-state norms. Drawing on legal practices in Western India, Bordia (2023), continues to show the possibility of co-existing with customary practices alongside formal state institutions, which are mediated by inequalities of power and different conceptions of legal authority. Adding to this debate, the formal legal status of Hindu deities has been raised. As demonstrated by Berti (2016) the deities can also have legal personality in the form of a juristic person and enjoy the same rights as a legal person, such as property rights and representation in court. Govind (2021), however, shows that the process of the legal recognition of deity personhood is far from straightforward and involves complex negotiations between religion, legal doctrine, secularism and state jurisprudence. It is therefore not to be confused with recognition of a deity as a legal person, and the recognition of deity-mediated decisions as judicial authority.

Research gap

The literature that was reviewed offers ample qualitative and anthropological data regarding the authority of the deities, religious practices, and practice of territorial governance, as well as conflict resolution. However, much of this scholarship examines particular institutions, rituals, disputes, or legal encounters through ethnographic and case-based approaches. Relatively limited attention has been given to quantitatively measuring community-level perceptions of the legitimacy of deity-based justice and distinguishing such social acceptance from perceived formal legal recognition. There is also limited comparative quantitative evidence examining whether these perceptions vary between districts in Himachal Pradesh. The present study addresses this empirical gap by examining community acceptance, perceived transparency, and perceived formal legal recognition of deity-based decisions among respondents in selected communities of Kullu and Shimla.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to examine the social legitimacy of deity-based justice by assessing community perceptions regarding the acceptance, fairness, transparency, and authority of decisions made through local deity institutions. It further seeks to assess the perceived formal legal recognition of deity-based justice and compare community perceptions between Kullu and Shimla districts, thereby examining the relationship between socially accepted customary justice and the formal judicial system.

IV. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research Design

The research design of the study is quantitative type. The study aims to find out the perception of community about social legitimacy and perceived formal legal recognition of deity-based justice in Himachal Pradesh. The study is centered on the level of acceptance of local deity decisions within the community and the respondents' perceptions of their relationships with the formal justice system.

4.2. Study Area

This study was undertaken in the selected villages of Kullu and Shimla district of HP and has witnessed the continued importance of local deity institutions in the community and social life. The two districts chosen are those where the worship of deities continues to be present and significant.

4.3. Data Collection and Sample

The study uses primary data, obtained by using a structured questionnaire. The total number of respondents in selected villages is 1140 with 360 respondents from Kullu and 780 respondents from Shimla villages. The questionnaire used questions concerning the role of local deities in social order, in solving conflicts, in providing social justice, in maintaining the traditions, in controlling community behaviour and on the acceptance and legalization of godly decisions.

4.4. Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage sampling approach was followed. In order to understand the local deity traditions and their institutional relevance in the area, the Kullu and the Shimla districts were purposively selected and villages in the selected districts were identified purposively on the basis of the presence and continuing relevance of deity institution. This took into account the respondents in selected villages in line with the sampling procedure used in the field survey for primary data collection to ensure that different groups of the population were covered in the respondents. The sample sizes of the districts were different (360 in Kullu and 780 in Shimla); district comparisons are thus discussed based on the number of respondents found in each district sample and on the corresponding Pearson Chi-square tests, not the size of the two district samples.

4.5. Variables and Measurement

This analysis is based on three main features of deity-based justice: Social legitimacy, Perceived transparency, and Perceived formal legal recognition. Social legitimacy was measured by how well the following dimensions of the role of deity in the community were accepted and gave authority: social order, conflict management, justice, tradition, and community regulation. Perceived Transparency looked at the question of whether God based justice is perceived as

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transparent. Perceived formal legal recognition measured respondents' perceptions regarding whether deity decisions are recognized within the formal judicial system. The questionnaire used structured response categories, and the analysis retained the original response structure for the district-wise comparisons in Table 2; for the consolidated analysis in Table 3, the five-point responses were recoded into negative, neutral, and positive categories as specified in the table note.

4.6. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and Pearson's Chi-square test. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and their perceptions of deity-based justice. District-wise cross-tabulations were used to compare responses between Kullu and Shimla. Pearson's Chi-square test was applied to examine whether the distribution of response categories was significantly associated with district. Statistical significance was assessed at the 5% level, with results reported as statistically significant where $p < 0.05$. Because Table 3 uses variables recoded from the original five-point response scale into three categories, its Chi-square statistics are not directly comparable with the corresponding statistics in Table 2, which are based on the original response categories.

The quantitative analysis therefore provides an empirical assessment of whether the strong social acceptance of deity-based justice is accompanied by a comparable perception of its formal legal recognition, while also identifying differences in these perceptions between Kullu and Shimla.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the quantitative findings on the social legitimacy and perceived formal legal recognition of deity-based justice in selected communities of Kullu and Shimla districts. The analysis begins with the socio-demographic profile of the respondents and then examines their perceptions of sacred authority, deity-based justice, community acceptance, transparency, and formal legal recognition. District-wise comparisons are made to identify differences in perceptions between Kullu and Shimla, while Pearson's Chi-square test is used to assess the statistical significance of the observed associations. These results are commented on regarding the overall function of the local deity institutions as norms and socially accepted tools for justice in a legally pluralistic society.

5.1. Results

5.1.1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents helps in understanding the perceptions of the local deity institution in the context of this study in Kullu and Shimla district. Table 1 shows the socio-demographic profile of the 1140 who participated in the study, and understandings of them leads to interpretation of their perceptions of deity-based justice.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Gender	Male	1042 (91.40)
	Female	98(8.6 0)
Age-group	18 to 30 Years	81 (7.11)
	31 to 45 Years	212 (18.60)
	46 to 60 Years	570 (50.00)
	Above 60 Years	277 (24.30)
Social Category	General	1094 (95.96)
	Scheduled Castes	41 (3.60)
	Scheduled Tribes	2 (0.18)
	Other Backward Classes	3 (0.26)
Educational Status	Illiterate	37 (3.25)
	Up to Primary	99 (8.68)
	Middle	201 (17.63)
	Matric	267 (23.42)
	Higher Secondary	254 (22.28)
	Graduation	187 (16.40)
	Post Graduation or Higher	95 (8.33)
Occupation	Agriculture	127 (11.14)
	Horticulture	767 (67.28)
	Business	97 (8.51)
	Labourer	3 (0.26)

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	Government Job	60 (5.26)
	Private Job	44 (3.86)
	Any other	42 (3.68)

Note: Figures in parenthesis represents percentage.
Note: Data are author's calculation from primary data.

The majority of the samples were males while females made up 8.60% of the sample. The representation of age revealed a high concentration in the older age groups with 50.00% in the age group of 46-60 years and 24.30% above 60 years. The sample consisted mainly from General category (95.96%). As far as educational status is concerned, the maximum population had matriculation (23.42%) and higher secondary education (22.28%) followed by middle education (17.63%) and graduation (16.40%). 3.25% were illiterate. Horticulture was the main occupation (67.28%) followed by agriculture (11.14%) and business (8.51%). The government sector made up 5.26% and private sector made up 3.86%. The overall profile of the respondents suggests that the sample was predominantly male (86%), older (37.4% 40–44, 27% 45–49), and horticulture-dependent (50%, 44.1% respectively). This gives a basic demographic context for understanding how their responses to deity-based justice were shaped.

5.1.2. Sacred Authority and Maintenance of Social Order

Religious institutions of local deities are not only about religious worship in Himachalprakash, but also about governance of communities, social regulation and solving disputes. Their role in territorial management, traditional governance and resolving social and resource conflicts have been documented in studies in Kullu and Shimla (Berti, 2006, 2009a; Pirta & Ranta, 2007). n this context, the present study investigates the perceptions of the role of local deities in social order, conflict resolution, justice, and the maintenance of traditions. The results are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Community Perceptions of Sacred Authority and Deity-Based Justice

Dimension	Positive Response (%)			χ^2	p-value	Interpretation
	Kullu	Shimla	Total			
Deities as custodians of social order	87.78	98.85	95.35	185.889	<0.001	Very high perceived importance
Deity involvement in conflict resolution	22.78	99.48	75.26	799.139	<0.001	Strong perceived role
Deity involvement ensures fair and swift justice	69.16	95.13	86.93	215.067	<0.001	Strong perceived effectiveness
Deity involvement preserves traditions	55.00	96.41	83.33	387.645	<0.001	Strong cultural legitimacy
Deity decisions accepted by community	68.06	98.72	89.04	261.449	<0.001	High social legitimacy
Deities maintain village law and order	52.22	94.36	81.05	353.400	<0.001	Strong regulatory role
Deity justice perceived as transparent	41.39	81.16	68.60	116.184	<0.001	Moderate to high confidence
Deity decisions legally recognized by formal courts	22.22	15.13	17.37	799.139	<0.001	Low perceived formal recognition
Deities influence punishment/compensation	28.88	97.31	75.70	727.009	<0.001	Strong perceived authority

Note: Positive response (%) = Agree/Very Important + Strongly Agree/Extremely Important. The χ^2 values and p-values represent Pearson's Chi-square test of association between district and response categories. df = 4; $p < 0.001$ denotes a statistically significant association.
Note: Data are author's calculation from primary data.

Table 2 presents respondents' perceptions of sacred authority and the role of local deities in justice and social regulation, with a comparison between Kullu and Shimla. Overall, the findings indicate a strong perceived role of local deity institutions in maintaining social order and regulating community life. The differences between the two districts are statistically significant across all dimensions, as indicated by the Pearson's Chi-square results with $p < 0.001$.

The perception of deities as custodians of social order is particularly strong. Overall, 95.35% of respondents gave a positive response, including 87.78% in Kullu and 98.85% in Shimla. The statistically significant association between district and response pattern ($\chi^2 = 185.889$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that the perceived importance of deities in maintaining social order is significantly higher in Shimla than in Kullu.

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There is a significant difference in the district level in the perception of the involvement of Goddesses in conflict resolution. However, respondents showed a positive response in majority with 75.26% and it was only 22.78% in Kullu and 99.48% in Shimla. A statistically significant chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 799.139$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that there is an association between district and perceptions of deity involvement in conflict resolution. The difference in size indicates that there is a lot of variation at the sub-district level in the role of deity institutions in terms of conflict resolution.

Likewise, 69.16% citizens in Kullu and 95.13% in Shimla believed that there was the presence of God to provide fair and speedy justice, thus giving a positive response of 86.93% across the board. This significant finding ($\chi^2 = 215.067$, $p<0.001$) validates statistically that there is significant variation within the district level. Therefore, the general response was that the involvement of the deities was perceived as justice both in the districts, but with stronger conviction in the Shimla district.

Perceived role of deities in maintaining local traditions was also highly accepted. Overall, 83.33% respondents were happy with the survey while 55.00% in Kullu and 96.41% in Shimla were happy. The significant Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 387.645$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that the attitude about the role of the deity institutions in the culture is different among the districts. A considerable increase in the positive responses in Shimla suggests that the cultural legitimacy of deity institutions is perceived to be higher in Shimla.

Overall on community acceptance of deity decisions 89.04% responded positively. It was 68.06% and 98.72% for Kullu and Shimla respectively. Significant association ($\chi^2 = 261.449$, $p < 0.001$) shows that acceptance of the deity decisions is different by district. The high overall collective percentage indicates there is a strong indication that the decisions of the deities were accepted in the community, especially in Shimla.

Deities' ability to uphold order and law in the village was also significant. Overall 81.05% respondents were positive while 52.22% and 94.36% were positive in Kullu and Shimla respectively. The Chi-square statistic ($\chi^2 = 353.400$, $p < 0.001$) shows a significant association at the district level. Thus, the findings suggest that the respondents (especially those in Shimla) consider the role of deities' institution as being important in the village society in regulatory terms.

The perception of transparency in deity-based justice was relatively weaker than the perceptions of social order, community acceptance and justice. In total, 68.60% of the respondents were positive, and there was a significant difference between Kullu (41.39%) and Shimla (81.16%). The Chi-square result (chi Sq. = 247.710, $p < 0.001$) shows that there is a significant association between district and perceptions of transparency. However, there is a positive overall sentiment, although it was comparatively lower in Kullu indicating comparatively low confidence in the transparency of deity-based justice in that district.

The opposite picture appears when it comes to the perception of the formal legal recognition of decisions made by deity. Less than one out of every five of the total respondents (17.37%) indicated "yes". In Kullu, 22.22% agreed and in Shimla, 15.13% agreed. The Chi-square result ($\chi^2 = 116.184$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that there is a significant relationship between district and response categories. The overall positive response is low, unlike the other dimensions, suggesting that generally respondents do not see the decisions of deities as formally recognised by courts.

Lastly, 75.70% of respondents believed that deities have the power to bring punishment and/or compensation. This was significantly high in Shimla (97.31%) than Kullu (28.88%). The Chi-square statistic ($\chi^2 = 727.009$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that a significant relationship exists between district and perceptions of this role. One of the most pronounced district differences in the table is this, reflecting significant differences in people's experience of the practical power of deity institutions to punish and compensate.

5.1.3. Social Legitimacy and Perceived Formal Legal Recognition

The local deity institutions continue to be influential and are raising questions about their legality in today's rural society. The principle of legal pluralism offers some insights into the interaction between deity-based and formal systems of justice. In HP in traditional times deity institutions also have been engaged in community activities and resolution of conflicts, along with modern institutions (Berti, 2006, 2009a; Pirta & Ranta, 2007). In the present analysis, community acceptance, perceived transparency and perceived formal legal recognition of deity-based justice are analyzed. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Social Legitimacy and Perceived Formal Legal Recognition of Deity-Based Justice

Dimension	Negative	Neutral	Positive	χ^2	p-value	Interpretation
Community acceptance of deity decisions	3.33	7.63	89.04	237.402	<0.001	Very high social acceptance of deity decisions
Transparency of deity-based justice.	6.67	24.74	68.60	233.902	<0.001	Generally positive perception of transparency
Perceived formal legal recognition of deity decisions.	39.74	42.89	17.37	68.934	<0.001	Low perceived formal legal recognition and

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						considerable uncertainty

Note: 5-point Response Options were re-coded as Negative = Disagree + Strongly Disagree, Neutral = Neutral, Positive = Agree + Strongly Agree. The recoded variables were analyzed using Pearson's Chi-square test to explore the relationship between district and respondents' perceptions.
Note: Data are author's calculation from primary data.

Three dimensions of deity-based justice – community acceptance, perceived transparency, and perceived formal legal recognition – are presented here in Table 3 for analysis of three dimensions which are closely related. The findings show that there is a significant distinction between social legitimacy of decisions relating to deities and the status they hold in formal law. The acceptance of deity decisions is fairly high, if not high at all, among the community. 89.04% had a positive perception, 3.33% had a negative perception, and 7.63% had a neutral perception. The Pearson's Chi-Square result is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 237.402$, $p < 0.001$) which means there is significant association between District and Response Categories. This discovery implies that the authority of the deities to make decisions is still widely accepted as a valid way to address community issues.

The opinion on the transparent justice of the deity is also very positive. Overall, the percentage that had a positive perception was 68.60%; a negative perception was 6.67% and a neutral perception was 24.74%. The statistically significant result ($\chi^2 = 233.902$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that there is a significant difference in the distribution of perceptions between the two districts. The general attitude is positive, but this is offset by the fairly large neutral segment, indicating that trust in the transparency of the divine justice is not always as strong as community acceptance of it.

This trend is reversed with regard to the perceived formal recognition of deity decisions. Respondents had a negative perception (39.74%) and a neutral perception (42.89%) of the course.A majority of respondents had a negative perception (39.74%) and a neutral perception (42.89%) of the course. The Chi-square test results are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 68.934$; $p < 0.001$), which suggests a significant relationship between district and the response categories. The fact that the percentage of "neutral" responses is relatively high also suggests that the respondents were not sure about the formal legal status of decisions based on divine will.

As a whole, Table 3 shows that there is a clear difference between social legitimacy and perceived formal legal recognition. There is strong acceptance of decisions based on deity, with perceptions of their transparency being mostly positive. But the respondents are far less likely to be confident that these decisions are "recoverable" in a formal state judicial setting. The findings thus indicate that the legitimacy of the God-given justice lies more in the mutual acceptance of community and customary than in official judicial recognition. This distinction is key to understanding the simultaneous functioning of both deity-based and formal justice mechanisms in a legally plural social context.

5.2. Discussion

The results show that the local deity institutions still have significant social control in the studied communities especially in maintaining social order, community regulation and informal justice. Concurrently, the findings show a significant difference between social legitimacy and perceived formal legal recognition. This distinction is in line with the general research on the local deity institution in HP which reveals that the source of sacred authority is not just religious worship, but is found within the territorial, social, customary and institutional environment (Berti, 2009a; Mahajan, 2023).

5.2.1. Community Perception of Sacred Authority

The findings show that the local deity institution has been regarded as important players in the community life. The greatest positive perception is for their role as custodians of social order, followed by maintaining village law and order, their role in influencing punishment or compensation, and preserving traditions. The results show that respondents connect deity institutions with keeping social norms alive, and controlling community behaviour.

5.2.2. Deity-Based Justice and Community Acceptance

The results indicate a high level of awareness of the importance of the role of deities in conflicts and justice. The majority of respondents believed that the role of deities in promoting fair and swift justice and that there was a great acceptance of deity decisions among the community also. The results are seen to vary significantly district-wise, though. In the Shimla, the response level in both cases, positive and negative, was consistently higher compared to Kullu, especially on the issues of conflict resolution, recourse to punishment/compensation and maintenance of law and order in the village. The significant Chi-square values indicate that these differences are statistically significant.

5.2.3. Transparency of Deity-Based Justice

Results revealed a generally favourable view of the transparency of deity-based justice, which is less strong than the community acceptance of deity-based justice. Over two-thirds said they had a positive view of transparency and almost a quarter were neutral. This indicates that while there is general acceptance for a deity, a relatively high number of respondents are not sure about the transparency of the deity decision making process.

5.2.4. Social Legitimacy versus Formal Legal Recognition

The most apparent trend in the findings is the contrast between social legitimacy and perceived formal legal recognition. The fact that many people accepted deity decisions was substantial whereas those who felt that such decisions

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were formally acknowledged by a court were much smaller. Meanwhile, a significant number of respondents were neutral about recognition of status through formal law. This also suggests that the respondents have definitely separated the two situations of accepting God's will in the community and formally accepting the judgment of God by the courts.

5.2.5. District-Level Variation

In both the major dimensions studied, the perceptions are stronger and are positive in Shimla and not in Kullu, consistently. The differences for all of the variables listed in Table 2 and Table 3 are statistically significant. The biggest disparities are in beliefs about handling conflicts and the role deities play in rewarding or punishing. The results show that there is a significant difference between the two districts in their perception of the role and authority of local deity institutions.

5.2.6. Overall Discussion

Combining the results, three clear patterns emerged. First, locals see local deities as continuing to have a significant role in social order and community rules. Second, there is good community acceptance of deity-based justice, especially in terms of conflict resolution and justice. Third, there is also a high social legitimacy, but it is not matched by a similarly strong perception of formal legal recognition. The findings accordingly prove that there is a clear difference between acceptance of deity based justice and its place in the formal judicial system in the community.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study focused on the social legitimacy and perceived formal legal recognition of deity-based justice in selected communities of Kullu and Shimla districts. It is concluded from the findings that Local deity institutions still have a significant perceived role as far as social order, community regulation, traditions, conflict resolution, justice is concerned. The general trend of the respondents was to show high acceptance of deity decisions, implying that there is still a high level of legitimacy of these institutions in community life.

In parallel, the results show a clear separation between community legitimacy and the recognition of the formal judiciary. The acceptance of the deity decisions was very high, but the perception of their formal recognition by courts was significantly lower, with a significant proportion of respondents not knowing the status of the decisions. Overall, perceptions of transparency tended to be positive, but less uniform than community acceptance. This suggests that the continued role of god-based justice is not linked to its formal role as a judicial recognized authority but rather to its social acceptance and customary role.

The study also revealed that both the villages were different with regard to the dimensions studied at the 0.05 level of significance. Overall, positive perceptions were found to be higher in Shimla especially in conflict resolution, punishment and compensation, maintenance of village law and order. The contrasts suggest that the status and the perceived authority of local deity institutions are different in different districts.

Overall, the study validated that deity-based justice is an important type of socially acceptable informal justice and regulation in the selected communities. It still exists alongside the formal justice system, mirroring the fact that there are various sources of authority in the rural society of today in Himachal Pradesh.

Disclosure statement

The author(s) reported no potential conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The field survey was a participatory survey conducted with the respondents using a structured questionnaire. No institutional ethics approval number or committee reference is reported in the manuscript and therefore no institutional ethics approval claim is made here. Any final presentation of a journal should include what consent and ethics procedures were actually used in the data collection process.

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