

DEVITHANS:
**A GENDERED SACRED
SPACE**

—

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my maternal grandmother Mrs Deepkanya Mukhia whose relentless devotion to the deities exposed me to the wonders of the natural sacred space—the devithans. The faith that I have imbibed is all organic since it grew within me naturally, perhaps because of the kind of environment at home. My parents have always supported my choices and have been the wind in the direction that I have always wanted to fly. I consider this work as the beginning of a long journey that I am set to take. As much as I believe in reaching the destination, in my understanding, the journey in between is unequivocal in rendering the joys of life.

CREDIT LINES

Through my professional engagement in a project at Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) Regional Office Eastern Himalaya/Northeast India, Gangtok, Sikkim, I was exposed to extensive fieldwork wherein I had to document sacred sites in West Sikkim. In this process, devithans was an important category of sacred sites that I had to map. Thus, I would like to extend credit to the Principal Investigator of that project, Dr Sarala Khaling for giving me the opportunity to undertake the research on the cultural values of West Sikkim. This exposed devithans as a fertile ground for me to sow other questions pertaining to gender that erupted in my mind.

FOREWORD

Like many others, I have always been personal about my religious beliefs. This work is centred on devithans which are sacred natural sites holding immense cultural value for the local people of Darjeeling Sikkim Himalaya. Though the devithans occupy centre stage, I have endeavoured to study them as gendered public spaces and not just as places of worship. They are very interesting dynamic sites providing intertwined matrices of culture, social mobility, and ecological value. They are the cultural hallmark of the local people sustained through intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge.

I have put some personal insights into this work with the intention of involving the reader with lived experiences. The patriarchal regulatory practices in the devithans propel the culture and religious beliefs of the local people. Cultural and religious continuity hinges on these gendered practices. But these gendered practices are upheld and ardently followed by the older generation. The intersectionality of education, class, age, caste, and sex produces differential lived experiences, which influence our disposition towards gender. From the interviews conducted, it was clear that education was a very

important factor that produced gendered, class based, and religious subjectivities. It is not my intention to idealise formal education because the traditional knowledge of the local people is an invaluable asset incomparable with anything else. The belief systems embedded in our societies are transformed by the way we interpret them. Hence, there will always be room left for tailoring the gendered practices I have experienced myself.

Abriti Moktan

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: A PEEK INTO THE *DEVITHAN* FROM A PERSONAL SPACE

My childhood memories are all about the time spent with my maternal grandparents. I grew up with them and was separated only when I started living with my parents. The schools in Darjeeling had long winter breaks and I spent those vacations at Singla Bazaar, a hamlet nestled in a valley surrounded by hills. The Rangit river meanders along Singla Bazaar and separates it from the neighbouring state of Sikkim. It is a beautiful place with warm winters and served as a good destination to flee to from the cold winters of Darjeeling. I spent the entire three months of my winter vacations in Singla with my grandparents. My grandmother took me along with her wherever she went and place was the devithans.

I visiting not just one but two devithans with my granny on auspicious occasions. She was very particular about the colour of the vermillion powder and the other necessary paraphernalia to be offered at the devithans. flowers of different hues, mostly red and white, from

the garden as an offering. She arranged the offerings immaculately on a brass plate and I helped her carry the water, an essential part of the offerings, in a kettle.

Of the two devithans, we first visited the one furthest away from the house. This one was situated on the banks of river Bada Rangit. I dreaded walking a small stretch of the passage up to the devithan because we had to climb on the embankments netted with steel mesh and had to walk on a very narrow trail. On reaching the sacred space, we removed our slippers and climbed on the mount, a built platform at the base of a huge fig tree that was supposedly the abode of the goddesses. I diligently followed my granny in her footsteps and offered prayers. We lit lamps, incense sticks, and paid obeisance to the residing deities. The only anthropogenic built form at this site was a small shed to house the idols. Everything else that occupied the space was trees. After performing all the rituals, we started on our way to the next devithan, which was situated at the other end of the village near Chhota Rangit. This devithan was on a steep slope also located at the base of an enormously large fig tree. On bare feet, I anchored myself on the branches of the tree spread on the ground to prevent myself from slipping, otherwise it would mean falling down many feet below on flat ground. I wondered why we needed to take risks to visit places of such high interest to my grandmother. Nevertheless, I never refused to visit these sacred spaces. In hindsight, I feel it was because of the opportunity that I got to accompany my granny on these adventurous visits to devithans along with a pinch of beliefs inculcated in me that kept me going. Walking bare feet on the mud, gravel, and branches gave a titillating sensation accompanied by an ever alert feeling, which at a young age probably gave me a lot of impetus to get attracted to these sacred spaces.

I still fondly cherish all those days of being with my grandparents and engaging in all the other activities that are offered and can be realised only in a rural setting. My interest and zest for life in rural spaces probably stems from my personal experiences and the closeness that I have always maintained with these spaces since my childhood.

I still visit Singla at every opportunity I get. The short trips to the devithans have ceased not because of loss of faith but simply because old age has caught up with my granny. Come to think of it, I have never been to those places by myself. In recent years, I have observed the changes made by the human agency to Singla's landscape. The rivers have dried and their banks are infested with mining activities. A resort has been built in the floodplain and lies incomplete in its construction. The picturesque landscape has been tarnished but it still manages to look stunningly beautiful. The devithans have also been subject to change; a road was constructed through the devithan near Chhota Rangit, and though it wasn't destroyed, its natural features have been scarred. These devithans, highly revered sacred spaces, may possibly have to accommodate the aspirations of development, which are not signs of the loss of faith but simply the change of it.

A peek into the devithans from my personal space would not be enough to know about them fully, therefore it is imperative for me to lay down their essential features in a larger context. Our culture, values, spirituality, and the nature around us helps us understand our existence in this world (Pungetti et al. 2012). Belief systems embedded in societies lay the foundation of sacred sites, which evoke awe and reverence among local people. It is common for us to relate sacred sites to temples, monasteries, churches, mosques, synagogues, and other religious architectural built-up structures but devithans are open natural sacred sites regarded as the abode of deities by the local people belonging to different Nepali ethnic groups such as Rais, Tamangs, Limbus, Chettris, Gurungs, Newars, Diwans, Sunuwars, Kamis, Damais, Sarkis, and Ghartis in the Darjeeling Sikkim Himalaya.

Devithan translates into '*devi*' meaning female deity and '*than*' meaning abode of the residing deity. They are small patches of community conserved areas where the locals worship a plethora of deities. They are conspicuous features in the rural landscape in Darjeeling Sikkim Himalaya, which is a sacred landscape interspersed with numerous sacred sites. The interviewees from villages Nesa and Labdang in West Sikkim and Singla in Darjeeling stated the

presence of more than one devithan in their respective villages. The establishment of these devithans is attributed to the presence of a water body or water source at the site, the sighting of a snake at the space, a vision to the shaman about the need to establish a devithan at the residing place of the reigning deity, or an appeasement to the deities to abate the onslaught of an epidemic or a natural calamity in the form of inclement weather conditions in the village.

The interviewees expressed that the devithans have existed in their villages since time immemorial and they have inherited them from their ancestors. Relli Maya Rai from Singla reminisced the death of two people in her village who did not abide by the regulatory practices of the devithans. One of them died soon after extracting fodder from the devithan and the other died because of meddling with the bee hive in the devithan. Such incidents left the villagers in awe of the powers of the *devis* and laid strong foundations for their belief system.

Apart from being sacred sites, the devithans are a heritage of the native people, which offers transmission of traditional ecological and spiritual knowledge through generations, cross-cultural understanding, environmental education, and biodiversity learning (Djoghla 2012). Apart from being an ethnic heritage, the basis of the devithans' existence is founded on a strong animistic belief system and myths upheld by the native people. They are a production of a belief system reified by biological diversity and a hydrological regime (water source or water body)—the objective reality of the place (Acharya and Ormsby 2017; Harari 2014). Traditional religious customs and rituals performed at these sites provide the people's cultural association with their land. They serve as an instrument for the local communities to establish their autochthony and sense of belonging to their land in a region with a complex social web consisting of people belonging to different ethnicities like Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalis, and also people from mainland India and various religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Devithans are not just places of worship but dynamic sites with cross-cutting matrices of cultural politics, social mobility, ecological

value, and most importantly, they are sites where social reproduction takes place, which sustains and supports varying gendered roles. Manifestation of cultural politics is through the very presence of the devithans for generations and the associated traditional customs, which serve as cultural hallmarks for the local people to establish their nativity. Social mobility is enacted through the free movement of the local people inside the devithans to procure water for their use. The thriving ecosystem in the devithans consisting of the flora and fauna and the abiotic environment contributes to the devithans' ecological value.

The devithans provide another site of social reproduction where gender as an embedded social structure (Risman 2004) manifests itself and is retained by society. The lived experiences of the interviewees throw more light on this social structure. Tikamaya Limbu from Nesa recounted that women had to put in more time and effort than men in ensuring that the devithans were clean and even young girls participated in cleaning the sacred space. Bimal Gurung from Labdang added that there should not be any division of work between a man and a woman but, during the ritual ceremonies performed at the devithans in his village, women performed their private domestic roles in these public spaces as well. After the ceremonies they had to cook the *prasad* offered to the deities and distribute it among the votaries. Men performed work that demanded more strength and energy like grinding rice, which is a raw ingredient for the preparation of *prasad*, using the traditional wooden mortar and pestle. They ran errands and carried heavy things that were required for the rituals.

The shamans preside over the rituals at the devithans and they are spirit mediums bridging the gap between the deities and common beings. Tikamaya said that she had never seen a female shaman carrying out the rituals in the devithans in her village. At some of the devithans sacrificial offerings are still made and this is done only by men. These gendered roles are culturally produced and can invariably be seen rooted in biology as a natural order (Dube 1988) to be practised and retained. The responses reflect the deep-rooted idea of

division of work even in a public space and the structuring of women as gendered subjects through rituals and practices.

Every continent, except Antarctica, abounds in sacred groves with varying habitat ranges (Bhagwat and Rutte 2006). The sacred groves represent the cultural relationship of the ethnic people with their land apart from being sites of worship. In India, studies have shown that they are present mostly in the biodiversity hotspot regions such as the Western Ghats and the Himalayas (Deb 2007). Around 14,000 of them are reported across the country but experts have estimated that these could range between 100,000-150,000 (Bhagwat and Rutte 2006; Panda 2017), thus making India a region with the highest concentration of sacred forests in the world (Ormsby and Bhagwat 2010). In Sikkim there are 56 sacred groves that have been documented, which are spread over four districts (Amirthalingam 2016). However, the Government of Sikkim recognises only 19 sacred groves consisting of various categories such as seven monastery forests, three devithans, two sacred caves, one hot spring, one lake, and five other holy sites (FEWMD 2011).

Sacred groves are referred to by different names in various parts of the world. In this research, I am focusing only on devithans that are sacred groves venerated by the local people in Darjeeling Sikkim Himalaya.

Devithans are considered public spaces since they are accessible to everyone and they have an added value of being sacred spaces. This additional value makes them interesting spaces among all the public spaces and offers a different vantage to understand the gender role at play. These sacred spaces are collectively maintained by the villagers and are open to public access. But the ownership of the land where they are located is often found to rest on private owners. These spaces exemplify community-conserved areas whose existence is founded on indigenous communities' strong belief systems.

The various regulatory practices and taboos that give differential power of access to a woman and a man also stem from these belief systems.

These practices are nothing but a manifestation of gender forces in society that lead to gendered behaviour. Gender is involved in what we do and perform based on the social elaboration of its understanding. Hence, trying to understand the gendered nature of the devithans and the power play of gender identities among the local people in these public sacred spaces will contribute to recognising an important strand of this cultural antiquity.

Change is the only constant reality which includes what happens every day in life. It is through these everyday phenomena that social reproduction takes place accounting for the reinforcement of the gendering of people's roles and spaces. Taking the devithans as the central public sacred space in the rural landscape, I engaged with local community members in comprehending the gendered nature of the



The Singha devithan in Singla Bazaar near river Chhota Rangit, which now has a built structure



The Kali devithan in Singla Bazaar near river Bada Rangit

devithans and the power play of gender identities of the local people in these public sacred spaces. Gender roles in the heterogeneous communities in the villages are explored and this. In turn, is used for understanding the gender roles of different communities in the landscape.

The nomenclature devithans suggests the gendering of the sacred spaces actively managed and controlled by local communities with a plethora of regulations for women in particular. This gives a very interesting complexity for uncovering and adding to the dynamics of the public space.

CHAPTER 2

THE BASIS OF RESEARCH

It is essential for any study to be robust and to have a value that adds to the existing body of literature. There are numerous topics that one can pick up for research but it is imperative to conduct the study in a systematic way. Gender has several meanings. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines it as 'a. Sex and b. the behavioural, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex.' The former is mostly relatable to people in general and the latter still remains to come into the limelight. The interviewees did not understand the concept of gender; some of them did not even associate it with their biological sex. Those who were exposed to contemporary education related it to one's biological sex. The reason I am trying to grapple with this is due to the fact that there are certain things for which we do not have concrete answers. As adulthood teaches, there are too many things which occupy ambiguous grey zones and are neither completely black nor white. An individual's understanding of gender might be based on one's exposure to contemporary education, the

geographical area where one is located, one's culture and traditions, and most importantly one's access to knowledge where a nuanced understanding of gender would lie.

I fully agree with Risman's 2004 conceptualisation of gender as a social structure deeply embedded in 'individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of our society.' Gender is neither the differences between men and women, nor does it refer to women (Nightingale 2006). It is rather the process of imagining, performing, and defining the differences based on the presumed biological sex. Gender is 'maintained through work', as described in the context of the division of work in the devithans where cooking and distribution of the offerings among votaries is seen as women's work while men perform physically demanding activities, preside over ceremonies, and make the sacrificial offering, thus showcasing their strength, power, and importance.

From the responses I received, gender structures access to the devithans based on some regulatory practices that give differential access to a man and a woman. Thus, gender is also 'defined in relation to particular spaces.'

This intersectional approach renders gender not as a static category but one that is constituted through other dynamic structures and categories (Avishai et al. 2015). Religion is another dynamic social structure which has gender as an important feature. An analysis of the responses shows that the interviewees' religion i.e. Hinduism veneers their still existent animistic belief system. Their traditional religion and culture 'hinges on gendered and sexual practices and rituals (Avishai et al. 2015). Thus, devithans offer a fertile ground for studying a public space using a gender lens that regards gender as a social structure (Risman, 2004) which is 'interpreted, performed and transformed by the people and communities' (Avishai et al., 2015) thereby socially constructing it.

Since devithans are public spaces highlighted by their cultural antiquity, it is imperative to deconstruct and understand culture which is always in a flux and it is impossible to capture it

because it is intangible in nature. It is only the physical markers of culture belonging to different eras that can be studied. But unless the process of change of culture and the way it transforms and transcends is documented there remains nothing for understanding. This is the reason that studies based on human ecology, traditions, culture, and ecology of human beings are so important.

I have come across people who are passionate about their work and have found true answers only after involving human studies in their practices. I have also come across people who look for scientific underpinnings for any study to be carried out. It's not that I am trying to prove them wrong but human studies are so wide and vast and their attributes like fingerprints that any one case study alone can be research in itself. I vehemently refute those who think people's stories are fiction with no value for scientific research. Our existence is defined by culture, values, spirituality, and nature, which are mutually inclusive, helping us unravel our existence on this earth. As Schumacher (1973) writes,

Science cannot produce ideas by which we could live. Even the greatest ideas of science are nothing more than working hypotheses, useful for purposes of special research but completely inapplicable to the conduct of our lives or the interpretation of the world. If, therefore, a man seeks education because he feels estranged and bewildered, because his life seems to him empty and meaningless, he cannot get what he is seeking by studying any of the natural sciences, i.e. by acquiring 'know-how'. That study has its own value which I am not inclined to belittle; it tells him a great deal about how things work in nature or in engineering; but it tells him nothing about the meaning of life and can in no way cure his estrangement and secret despair.

This resonates with my thoughts and cements my faith in human studies. After all, it is the stories which remain with us and evoke awe, reference, inspiration, compassion, empathy, and a reason to live for another day.

When we think of public places rarely do we imagine religious spaces. Even if we do, we relate sacred sites with mostly architectural built-up structures but devithans are open natural sites having spiritual significance. They are public spaces as emphasised by the interviewees. I thought taking them as a study site which also serves as a site for social reproduction in Darjeeling Sikkim Himalaya would be a unique facet in our learning of this cultural antiquity of the local residents.

I conducted nine semi-structured interviews including six interviews conducted physically and three over the phone. Some might think that telephonic interviews are not a proper way for conducting a study but given the current Covid-19 pandemic they were an avenue that I wanted to explore with support from the Zubaan team who agreed to this method. I would also like to state that though it is common that women do not easily speak freely especially regarding subjects that are sensitive, I was aware of the possibility that telephonic interviews might make them more uncomfortable, but to my surprise these interviews went as smoothly as any physical interview. This was possible because I had interacted at some level with the interviewees during my earlier fieldwork for the project that I am professionally engaged in.

The information garnered through the interviews was divided into sections and written down according to these sections in an Excel sheet. This study is based on qualitative research methods and the interviews are the only tool employed along with personal insights from the experience of visiting the devithans. Devithans are sacred groves found in Darjeeling Sikkim Himalaya and an interviewee confirmed their presence in Nepal too. There are numerous other sacred groves in our country which are referred to by different names. There is no absolute figure or documentation of all the sacred groves in India let alone any study on devithans from a gender perspective. Thus, this work visibilizes the invisible public sacred spaces such as the devithans, which not only serve as an epitome of an intrinsic human-nature relationship but are also dynamic sites having mosaics of culture, ecological value, social mobility, and gendered practices.



In conversation with the interviewees in Singla

CHAPTER 3

GENDERED REGULATORY PRACTICES

Devithans are founded on a strong belief system and this is the sole basis of their existence. If there are no believers then would there be any devithans left? The local people are certain that their ethnic heritage would be preserved and future generations will continue their ancestral practice of worshipping at these sacred sites. It is also certain that the devithans will undergo some form of transformation. The Singha devithan has a concrete built-up structure to house the deities established by some dedicated villagers who thought that an architectural structure would make the foundation of the sacred space stronger. This is an instance of people's aspirations of giving a permanent marker to their sacred space, which not only serves to consolidate their faith in the deities but also provides a tangible structure for them to pass on to the next generation. This was a common phenomenon observed in the places that I visited, where villagers aspired to build a temple or a concrete structure to house the reigning deities. The transformation from a natural open space dotted

with trees, which is a characteristic feature of the devithans, to an architectural built-up structure changes the dynamics of the devithans. But the local people have their own reasons for their aspirations, which cannot be denied to them.

From folklore that people recount, devithans are associated with 'devis' or female deities. Each devithan is dedicated to a particular reigning devi and other associated deities. In Nesa, there are Kali devithans, Sheetal devithans, Maya devithans, and Nakhthan devithans. In Labdang, there are Singha devithans and Nakhthan devithans, and in Singla, there are Singha devithans and Kali devithans. At all these devithans, the villagers collectively perform the rituals annually or biannually. Offerings of flowers, fruits, vermilion powder, milk, and prayer flags are required during the ritual ceremonies. In Nesa at the Kali devithan, a sacrificial offering of a doeling, a pair of pigeons, and a pair of chickens is still made but only the men are involved in making this offering, which shows the gendered nature of the ritual performed. In Labdang and Singla, the sacrificial offering at the Singha devithan has stopped since there were instances of people falling sick after the offering was made, as reported by the interviewees. Thus, particular deities are seen to demand sacrificial offerings while others require only flowers and fruits for propitiation.

The interviewees attached meaning and significance to the devithans, which are considered to be the abode of the almighty and powerful deities. They worship at all the devithans for the protection of their village against natural calamities, outbreak of epidemics, and for bountiful harvests. Certain devithans are regarded as wish-fulfilling sites where people often make wishes and they promise that, if their wishes are fulfilled, they will make certain promises that they will religiously follow. These natural open sacred spaces are found in certain forest patches in the villages where there is spring water or where some form of divine embodiment such as a snake is sighted. These spaces are inherited by the villagers from their ancestors with no fixed point of origin. The local people do point out that the devithans'

locations were identified by the shamans who preside over the ritual ceremonies and are the spirit mediums bridging the gap between the commoners and the deities. The shamans are also healers if someone is sick in the village. They are important entities in the process of the intergenerational transmission of traditional cultural knowledge.

Some interviewees belonged to Nesa, Labdang, and Tumin villages in Sikkim and the others belonged to Singla, a village on the outskirts of Darjeeling. In Nesa there are 10 devithans while in Labdang there are six and in Singla four devithans have been reported. The devithans are a conspicuous feature of the rural landscape in Darjeeling Sikkim Himalaya. One of the interviewees who has some property in Pantor village in Pheedim district in Nepal stated that there were devithans there as well with similar features and governed by the same social taboos as in the Indian villages in Darjeeling and Sikkim.

The interviewees said that devithans are sacred spaces offering a serene and tranquil environment where they find peace. They visit the devithans to offer prayers, seek blessings, and ask for solace in difficult times. In every village, the devithans can be accessed by anyone as no one needs anybody's permission to visit them. Also, it is not mandatory for anyone to worship at the devithans. There is a similar pattern across the villages, which shows that there are collective annual or biannual ceremonies organised at the devithans. Traditional rituals are performed at the sacred sites and there are specific systems in place that the villagers follow for organising the ceremonies in different villages. The frequency of visits to the devithans varies depending on auspicious occasions, days with divine significance, and the needs and interests of the people. But a common feature across all the devithans is the annual or biannual ceremony organised at these sacred sites.

Tikamaya said that, in Nesa village, they have divided themselves into groups of two households each and annually one group organises the ritual ceremony at the devithan. The rituals are conducted and presided over by a shaman. She said, 'I have never seen a female shaman leading the ceremony at the devithan in my village.' At other

places, such as in Labdang and Singla, the *samaj*, a collective body of all the villagers, organises the ritual ceremonies at the devithans.

The devithans often co-occur with natural water sources which reinforce their existence even more. Many of them are believed to be present since time immemorial and the people state that they are an ethnic heritage that has passed down to them from their ancestors. The devithans are founded on a belief system and are guarded by the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge. They are governed by social taboos including various regulatory practices. No one should enter the premises of the devithan after the consumption of intoxicants, non-vegetarian food, garlic, and onions. People should refrain from extracting any material such as fuel wood or fodder from the sacred space. If there is a death in the family, then all the family members cannot visit the devithans in the mourning phase. Women in particular are subject to gendered regulatory practices; they have the onus of maintaining the purity and sanctity of the devithans. They are forbidden to enter the sacred space when they are menstruating, they are barred from entering it during pregnancy or childbirth.

The interviewees stated that these regulatory practices are important for the existence of the devithans. If these sacred spaces are not maintained and kept clean and pollution free, then the villagers would have to experience the wrath of the deities in the form of natural calamities or an outbreak of an epidemic. Thus, all the traditional customs and norms should be preserved and carried forward for the conservation of the devithans so that they do not become a figment of the past and are a living reality for future generations.

Older women emphatically stated that they had been following the practices inherited from their ancestors and even if their access to the devithans is hindered during a certain time, they will continue the traditional practices since they believe that the practices must have some intrinsic truth and value. Seniors attach meanings to these social taboos and they continue to practise them in their everyday lives hoping to set an example for their children to follow. Menstruation is considered impure across societies all over the country. In Kerala

(Notermans et al. 2016), a case study showed that eating non-vegetarian food, alcohol consumption, menstruation, childbirth, and death are all impure activities that should be avoided before entering a sacred space. The study conducted in Meghalaya and Karnataka showed similar regulatory practices and the interviewees believed that, if they were to pollute the sacred grove or extract resources from the site, they would have to deal with the wrath of the deities in various forms ranging from sickness to death of the person breaking the sanctity of the place or a member of their family (Ormsby 2013).

Such punishments have been illustratively narrated by Relli Maya in Singla. She recounted an incident where after extracting fodder from the Singha devithan a person fell sick and ultimately died. Another person met a similar fate after disturbing a bee hive in the same devithan. The local people believe that the reigning deity of the Singha devithan is very powerful. All the taboos are religiously followed and these beliefs have converted the devithans into sites where norms of purity and pollution are reified through regulatory practices (Acharya and Ormsby 2017).

Relli Maya's family is closely associated with the Singha devithan. Their house is close to the devithan and they ardently worship at the site. Her husband Sante Rai took me back to the olden times when there was a water body at the devithan. He recalled the disappearance of the water body after a snake was shot dead at the sacred site. These incidents reaffirm their faith in the devithan and also make them wary of breaking the rules. They stay in a joint family and have built a house with earnings from their small eatery. They believe that because they take the name of the devis and remember them before commencing any activity, it results in success. It is an involuntary action with an intrinsic faith that makes them remember the devis in their everyday lives. Relli Maya is an empowered business woman; her contribution to her family's finances gives her the power and space to state her opinions. During the interview, she emphatically told me that, in current times, it is not possible for men to abuse their wives; women would not take any form of injustice from them. She portrayed a world

of equal powers for a woman and man. Her statements were in line with the way the household chores were divided. She stated that there was no fixed activity to be done by a particular individual, whoever was free completed the necessary activity be it her sons washing the clothes. She was quite optimistic about their shared belief system and was hopeful that her children will carry forward the belief system and the ancestral practice of worshipping at the devithans.

The roles assigned to us since our birth are social constructs which have seeped into our lives through generations. But culture being under a constant flux has also accommodated newer ideas and belief systems, which has led to the transformation of the way things happen around us. My mother was born in a Mukhia ethnic group, married to a Buddhist and follows both Hinduism and Buddhism. This is a hybridity of religions observed in many of the households. She has an unwavering faith in the deities that she worships but is also quite progressive in her thinking. She tells me it is important that I should be able to earn a living and live happily whether I choose to marry in the same clan or someone outside the religion that we practise. For me, as her only daughter, it is quite commendable to hear such a thing even though they would definitely accept if I choose not to marry at all.

But of course, there is a varying degree of patriarchy present in my family too. I say varying because even though the men in my family do the dishes and cook, the kitchen remains a woman's domain. The custom of leaving one's family after marriage and dropping one's maiden name is another form of patriarchy.

My maternal grandmother has a perception that one's heart and mind should be free of negativities and the only imperative while praying is to have a 'pure heart'. But with all the progressiveness that my mother and grandmother exude, they have rooted faith when it comes to considering menstruation as impure. Both of them ardently follow the norm of not allowing a menstruating woman in their prayer rooms. They strictly forbid us from going to the devithans or any other sacred space if we have our monthlies. Sometimes, I try to coax my mother that it is only biological for us to menstruate but there is no

room to dissuade her since the taboos have a deep-seated meaning in her life. Also, we can't try to dissuade a whole generation of people to go against their faith for they have their own reasons to believe in it.

Every instance of going to the devithan with my grandmother in Singla is now a memory that I cherish. But in hindsight when I analyse these visits, it was only my grandmother who took me to the devithans. My grandpa was a philanthropist and a social person; he led and mobilised the local people while organising the annual ceremonies at the devithans but never got into my grandmother's role. Thus, it is only now that I feel and get a clearer picture of the stark division of activities carried out by my grandparents. My grandpa had a public persona; he was respected by all the villagers and was actively involved in any events organised in the village. In contrast, my grandmother occupied the private space and conducted all the private affairs pertaining to our family. She frequented the devithans to pray for the well-being of the whole family and was the force behind all the smooth transactions in the household. If one operated in the public space, the other was the foundation of the private space of our family.

My mother is no different; she takes a lead in going to the devithans and pulls my dad and me to all the sacred sites. She and my grandmother are very inflexible in their faith when it comes to the idea of menstruation being considered impure. I remember vividly how I had to abstain from entering the sacred space in the house for seven days, and only after taking a bath and sprinkling holy water on myself, could I transcend into the pure state. The transition from the impure to the pure state is a monthly affair that many of us have to undergo. These rituals are embedded in our societies and are followed by people belonging to particular faiths. In comparison, my paternal aunts are more orthodox because they have a different level of devotion. They do not consume garlic, follow a vegetarian regime, and abide by all the regulatory practices. They are frequent visitors to the devithans in our locality in Ghoom Bhanjyang and are devout followers of the devis.

There was clear compliance with regulatory practices among the interviewees but all of them were connected with the same bond of faith.

The newer generations have a different perspective on the belief system. Bimal, an interviewee from Labdang, said that the work division and differential power of access to sacred spaces on the basis of sex is embedded in society. He claimed, 'All the norms are an illusion stemming from illiteracy and a change can be brought about in society only through changing the mentality of the people.' He further added that he might not have educational qualifications but, by counselling people to change their mentality, a domino effect could be set, which would eventually lead to everyone having a different mindset regarding the gendered nature of practices in society. On the other hand, Rachana maintained that people had been subject to years of conditioning, which brought forth an involuntary reaction of abiding by all gendered norms and practices. Even after being vociferous in her opinions and trying to encourage her family members, she stated that the orthodox nature of their beliefs left little room for any kind of persuasion.

A devithan is marked by its natural setting, which has ecological value and is also a sacred space dedicated to goddess worship. All devithans are community-conserved areas that exemplify the association of women and nature, thus gendering the space where the 'image, role and status of women has been created by the overarching culture' (Sudarso et al. 2019). The division of labour is involuntarily adhered to by the people. The regulatory practices described earlier have deep rooted 'patriarchal culture perpetuated through religious dogma', which has become the lived experience and a code of conduct for the people (Sudarso et al. 2019). Gender structures women's access to the devithans as menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth make them impure but, interestingly and ironically, devithans happen to be a space where the reigning female deities are worshipped. The other regulatory practices as described earlier are meant for all in society. The rituals at the devithans are performed and presided over only by

the shamans and the responses reveal that there are no female shamans presiding at the rituals. Only men make the sacrificial offering. This inequality in the gendered ritual performance and regulatory practices can be seen as an extension of the patriarchy that is systematically practiced and is a part of the lived realities of the interviewees.

CHAPTER 4

VALIDITY OF DEVITHANS

Devithans have undoubtedly undergone a transformation that I too have observed in my lifetime. Their outstanding feature is the natural open space with trees and plants often with a source of water. Undoubtedly, they have an ecological value but the value that is more powerful is their association with the deities that leads to their existence. Simply put, their sole foundation is the people's belief system as they attach meaning to the sacred space. But those attached meanings can be subject to interpretations by each individual. In addition, there is a cultural flux influencing and modifying the belief system. There are three threats to sacred groves identified in literature: religious, cultural, and social (Notermans et al. 2016; Ormsby 2013).

Social threats refer to the transition from an extended to a nuclear family system, which results in encroachment of the sacred space due to changes in property ownership and house building (Notermans et al. 2016). The devithans are often found to have private ownership but are spaces that are collectively managed by the local people, and

the private owners do not restrict movement within them. One of the interviewees said that construction within the premises of the devithans should be allowed if they are privately owned as there is an increasing demand for land to accommodate the expanding village population. He stated that the land is very valuable and for a villager it is an asset that cannot be given up. It is only natural that people have aspirations that encompass a certain standard of living that they can afford with their livelihoods.

Cultural-religious threats are manifested by the repercussions due to conversion into other religions, which replaced the indigenous belief system with rational scientific arguments (Notermans et al. 2016) and which does not support nature worship. The changing belief system leads to a shift from nature-centric to temple-centric worship replacing folk deities with pan-India Hindu deities in a process called Sanskritization (Ormsby 2013). This change is a conspicuous reality in society today as inferred from the interviews where people said that they aspired to house the deities in concrete built-up structures. Over the years, I have seen the transformation of the natural sacred space of the devithans into temples in Singla and Ghoom Bhanjyang, though they retain their association with the reigning devis. Another stark reality pointed out by the interviewees is the discontinuity of sacrificial offerings at various devithans. This is mainly attributed to the fact that, when blood was offered, some people suffered ailments and thus the practice had to be stopped. The sacrificial offerings have been replaced by offerings of fruits and flowers. Some of my key informants attribute the discontinuity of sacrificial offerings to the unavailability of a particular animal to be sacrificed while others maintain that it is a tailoring of practices in line with the changing belief system.

Devithans are collectively managed by the local people and are public spaces that are a classic epitome of traditional institutions operating informally. They have a porous boundary with no fixed demarcation but a local person can invariably tell the stretch of the sacred space. Even literature shows that the sacred groves represent fragmented forest landscapes, often present outside protected regions

with areas ranging from less than one hectare to several hundred hectares (Acharya and Ormsby 2017; Panda 2017). Private ownership of most of the devithans may in future endanger access to sacred spaces and collective mobilisation of the local people in organising the rituals if the private owners seek to implement restricted movement on their properties.

Another important dimension is the absence of devotion for the devithan. This absence does not necessarily mean a total lack of faith and a desire to decimate the devithans as illustrated by Rachana. She hails from village Tumin in East district Sikkim but has mostly stayed outside home for her education. She told me that in her village, each locality is composed of one specific community and each of these localities has a devithan which is the source of drinking water for community members. She thinks if the site were not the water source, then it probably wouldn't be a site of worship as well. For her, religious sentiments are very personal and she does not want to publicly express her faith. She considers the devithans sacred spaces but she neither participates in the ritual ceremonies nor visits these sacred spaces. She stated that sometimes she visits the devithan to offer flowers only to respect her parents' feelings.

The foundation of the devithans faces religious, cultural, and social threats along with an erosion of the belief system. But embedded social structures such as religion and gender still uphold the existence and continuance of this public space that is certain to stay in our society. More research is required to see this space using the gender lens so that the mechanisms that create gender can be identified and we as scholars can perhaps offer alternatives and 'use our scholarly work to contribute to envisioning a feminist utopia' (Risman 2004) where there is equality in roles, practices, and norms.

CHAPTER 5

DEVITHANS, GENDERED SACRED PUBLIC SPACES

The richness of culture and traditions make the Darjeeling Sikkim Himalayan landscape a region that provides fertile ground for researchers to delve into a variety of topics. Devithans represent an important strand of the cultural fabric of this landscape, which is an important space to be covered by researches. It is important to study the devithans' different dimensions such as their nature as public sacred spaces with complex management procedures, religious sites having a hybridity of nature and temple worship, and most importantly, sacred spaces providing the ground for social reproduction embedded in society. Apart from learning about devithans as gendered spaces, one can also infer from these sacred spaces how the local communities' culture treats nature. This is an important aspect in the anthropogenic epoch that we are currently in. Thus, evidently devithans are dynamic sites having myriad features, which deserve attention before they get lost and become a figment of the past.

There are fixed roles assigned to people on the basis of their sex, which leads to the construction of specific roles that are expected of a woman and a man. Gendered roles are a production of these social constructs that have found their way into our present societies. How these constructs have been socially reproduced over the ages is a phenomenon in itself. Culture, traditions, and knowledge are transmitted through generations via written documents, oral histories manifested through folklore and myths, and the customs that are inherited and practised by the local people. The stronger the social and cultural fabric of a particular community, the stronger are their tangible manifestations. Gendered roles are also maintained through this intergenerational transmission and become more impregnable through social reproduction as they are guarded by the people who uphold them.

After taking into account all the responses from my interviews, I gather that more than one devithan is present across all the villages the interviewees belonged to. They also all have similar features. What binds these sacred public spaces are the taboos associated with them and the gendered norms that are diligently followed by the local people. Some of the gendered regulatory practices that put a woman at a disadvantage by banning her entry to the space at specific times are commonly observed across societies. Also, the division of labour at the devithans, ritual practices being presided and carried out only by men, and the gendering of nature by dedicating the sacred space to the worship of goddesses all make the devithans gendered public spaces. Among the nine interviews conducted, I had ensured that there was diverse representation of educational qualifications, sex, age, occupation, and community so that I could understand how one's background affected one's disposition towards gendered practices. I interviewed six women and three men. The age of the interviewees can be divided into three sections of up to 30 years representing the younger generation, 30 to 60 for middle-aged, and above 60 for senior citizens. The educational qualifications ranged from no formal education to one pursuing a PhD. The interviewees' occupations

also varied from a farmer, homemaker, entrepreneur, labourer to an assistant professor. The interviewees belonged to the ethnic tribes of Limboos, Gurungs, Rais, Mukhias, and Sharmas, and one of them belonged to Thakurs, a mainstream Indian community, and all of them practised Hinduism.

Faith and belief in the devithans were invariably a common foreground for all the interviewees. Even an outlier response from Rachana suggests that, although she herself does not visit the devithans, she has respect for the believers and sometimes even goes to the devithan at the behest of her parents. She stated with conviction that although she might be a non-believer, she wouldn't participate or do anything to insult the sacred space. According to her, all the people in her village, even the younger generation ardently venerate the devithan and worship the deities. The interviewees from the younger generation rallied around the idea of seeing and bringing about a change in the regulatory practices that are upheld by the local people. They stated how change is required for there to be no differential access to a public sacred space like the devithan on the basis of a biological process that affects women. They spoke about counselling people against gendered regulatory practices of forbidding women from entry into the sacred space during their monthlies. But Rachana was of the view that, though she had tried convincing people, it was hard to dissuade them since they are orthodox about their religious beliefs and have been conditioned to follow the practices thought to have a basis in the Holy Scriptures. All the interviewees from the middle- and senior-aged categories were of the opinion that there is no need for any changes in the practices that they have inherited and which have been in place since time immemorial.

Devithans provide an interesting intersect of nature and temple worship. The trees and the water body at a devithan reify the sacred entity housing the deities but a need of housing the deities in concrete structures is emerging as the latest aspiration of the local people. In my personal experience, I have seen the transition of the devithans from being natural open sacred spaces with no concrete structures

to now having built structures in the natural environment. People's aspirations are in line with what they consider development for their village and society. They often think that development means metallic roads which are necessary for transport and communication and built structures with healthcare facilities and schools for their children's better education. Thus, infrastructural development is an aspiration they have extended to their sacred spaces as well but with the inherited customs and norms intact. There has also been a tailoring of the practices at the devithans such as discontinuation of sacrificial offerings and replacing folk deities with Hindu deities, which can be termed as Sanskritization and a shift from nature-centric to temple-centric worship.

The gendered practices are carried out by women themselves and this can be attributed to the years of conditioning that they experience since the time of their birth. Although there are some sections of people from the younger generation who want to start a domino effect by dissuading people through education, this is an enormous task of deleting the indelible mark of gendered customs embedded in society for generations. But they are hopeful that, by practicing the change that they want to see, a step will be taken in the direction that they want to embark on. An individual's myriad thought processes empowered by knowledge gained through one's exposure to education is evident from the responses that I received in the interviews. There is no doubt that higher education opens and expands an individual's horizon of thinking but traditional knowledge pertaining to the culture and ecology of the indigenous communities is powerful and not learnt in formal education. In present times, increasing efforts are being made to understand the value of this traditional knowledge transmitted by indigenous people.

It is commendable that, in an Anthropocene epoch in which our planet is languishing under unprecedented anthropogenic pressures, there are patches of community-conserved areas such as the devithans that exemplify the local people's dedication towards their cultural beliefs founded on their strong traditional knowledge. It might be

seen that the only reason for local people to maintain the devithans is their belief that these are the abodes of the deities. It is also a cultural belief that has maintained a traditional institution for generations. As discussed by Diamond (1991) 'the cultural hallmarks include spoken language, art, tool-based technology, and agriculture.' The essence of culture captured in language cannot be preserved in some tangible form like fossils which can be studied later. The devithans, which embody rich traditional practices, are places with physical forms like trees and springs, but their existence is encapsulated in the institution of spoken language which transmits traditional knowledge. Hence, the importance of documenting the informal institution of the indigenous communities. If not preserved, it runs the risk of becoming extinct, with no trace left behind.

It was important to know what the interviewees understood about devithans being gendered public spaces. All of them saw the devithans as public spaces but, except for one, all of them associated gender with biological sex. This was evident from their level of exposure to the concept of gender through literature; education surely produces gendered, class based, and religious subjectivities (Avishai et al. 2015). Gender means neither a woman nor the differences between a woman and a man (Nightingale 2006). Menstruating and pregnant women, and those who have given birth are restricted from certain activities and forbidden to enter sacred spaces such as the devithans. Men are assigned important roles of performing the rituals and tasks that show their masculinity, while women perform their domestic duties in a public place by cooking and distributing the offerings among the votaries. Thus, devithans become important in defining what it means to be a 'woman' or a 'man' and gender therefore is 'in part defined in relation to particular spaces' (Nightingale 2006). Gender and religion are mutually-constitutive socially-constructed concepts that are performed, interpreted, and transformed by people (Avishai et al. 2015). Like in many societies around the world, in Darjeeling Sikkim Himalaya too, cultural and religious continuity depends on gendered practices and regimes. Religious dogmas perpetuate a patriarchal

culture, which invariably becomes a way of life and the everyday lived reality of the local people (Sudarso et al. 2019). There exists a dichotomy in opinions regarding gendered regulatory practices in the sacred public space of devthans among the local people interviewed. But continuing these gendered practices is intertwined with the belief system of the local people, and I feel it is a personal choice of each individual to be a carrier of traditional practices, which surely can be tailored according to the everyday lived realities of each one of us.

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PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Tikamaya Limboo, telephonic conversation, 12 October 2020.

Bimal Gurung, telephonic conversation, 12 October 2020.

Rachana Sharma, telephonic conversation, 22 November 2020.

INTERVIEWS

Deepkanya Mukhia, in discussion with the author, Singla, 29 October 2020.

Relli Maya Rai, in discussion with the author, Singla, 29 October 2020.

Sante Rai, in discussion with the author, Singla, 29 October 2020.

Sumitra Thakur, in discussion with the author, Singla, 30 October 2020.

Dambar Bahadur Limboo, in discussion with the author, Singla, 30 October 2020.

Balkumari Limboo, in discussion with the author, Singla, 30 October 2020.

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