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Berreman, Gerald

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## *Cultural Variability and Drift in the Himalayan Hills*

GERALD D. BERREMAN  
*University of California, Berkeley*

THE lower Himalaya mountains between western Kashmir and eastern Nepal are populated by peoples sharing common and distinct cultural, linguistic, and historical traditions. Therefore, this is clearly a "culture area" within the usual meaning of that term. The populations of this area, collectively termed *Pahari* ("of the mountains"), comprise a variety of subgroups which share basic cultural patterns but show local differences in such features as dialect, ceremonial forms, deities worshipped, house styles, dress and ornamentation, range of castes, and rules of marriage. These variations are often extremely limited in distribution so that it is possible for one acquainted with a region to identify readily the particular valley or ridge from which a person comes by his speech or dress. It is not difficult to pass through two or more such areas in a day's trek. This highly localized cultural variability is especially striking to one acquainted with the people of the plains to the south.

A second impressive feature, at least in the subarea to be reported here, is the comparative cultural homogeneity across caste lines within a particular locality in the hills. A person's caste affiliation is generally impossible to determine, even by someone of his own area, except by direct inquiry or by observing him in his traditional occupation.

In this account, the facts supporting these generalizations will be briefly described. Then an attempt will be made to analyze and explain them in terms of common conditions and processes. Some further light may thereby be thrown upon the concepts of cultural drift and culture area, their usefulness and relationship to one another.

The research reported here was carried out in and about the village of Sirkanda, situated in the lower Himalaya mountains of North India, about 150 miles north and slightly east of Delhi and within a day's hike of the well-known hill station, Mussoorie.<sup>1</sup> Sirkanda is large for a hill village, containing some 384 residents, half of whom live all or most of the time in outlying cattle sheds or field houses and half of whom live in the village proper. The people of Sirkanda are speakers of a subdialect of the Central Pahari language or dialect group. They live on the western border of the area in which that language is spoken, next to Jaunsar Bawar where begins the Western Pahari language.<sup>2</sup> They are also on the western border of the former princely state (now district) of Tehri Garhwal. They spend most of their lives within the 4 air-mile radius of Sirkanda which comprises the 3 parallel spurs of hills known as Bhatbair ("sheep's den"), containing less than 5,000 people in 60 villages and settle-

ments. Their lands, their relatives, and the people with whom they deal for goods and services are nearly all found within this area.

#### PAHARI CULTURE AREA

The narrow crescent comprising the lower Himalayas qualifies as a culture area as well as any area could, other than an isolated island. It is sharply defined culturally and geographically. Its people are considered by themselves and by others to be ethnically distinct. They are known collectively as Pahari. They acknowledge this appellation, distinguishing other Indians from themselves as Desi ("of the country") and the Tibeto-Burmese mountain people as Bhotiya. High-caste Paharis—those who claim Brahmin and Rajput status—are dominant numerically and economically. They have long been known as Khasa or Khasiya and are thought by scholars to be the descendants of Aryan-speaking immigrants from Central Asia (Grierson 1916:7). The Pahari service castes, widely and loosely referred to as Dom, are generally said to be descendants of pre-Aryan indigenes (Walton 1911:97). Paharis are physically indistinguishable from other residents of North India, and they speak an Indo-Aryan language closely related to that of Rajasthan (Grierson 1916:2). They are not tribal people in any conventional sense of that term. Rather, they are hill-dwelling Hindus who, though undoubtedly rustic by the standards of their plains-dwelling countrymen, share much of the tradition of North Indian village Hindu culture.

Paharis are effectively isolated from close contact with non-Paharis. To the north are the high Himalayas inhabited only in pockets by the racially, linguistically, and culturally distinct Bhotiyas with whom contacts have been limited.<sup>3</sup> At the foot of the mountains to the south lie two uninhabited and uninviting strips of land, the *bhabar* (barren and rocky) and below that the *tarai* (low, swampy, and malarial). Beyond these are the plains from which some, and perhaps ultimately all, Paharis once came, but whose people have long been in infrequent and unintensified contact with the hill regions.

The distinctiveness of the Paharis as a group is suggested by the fact that they share a common and distinctive linguistic stock. They also share a number of other cultural features which distinguish them from the rest of the North Indian culture area and specifically from the plains-dwellers adjacent to them. These features, like their language, are not entirely unique or divorced from those of the rest of North India, but are divergent forms grounded in a common heritage. In emphasizing differences, care must be taken not to ignore the numerous and basic similarities common to Paharis and other North Indians. Differences are, however, the primary subject of this analysis. Among distinguishing Pahari characteristics are:

- (1) A somewhat distinctive caste structure wherein there is a major division between the dominant high or twice-born castes ("big castes" in local parlance), made up of Brahmins and Rajputs, and the "untouchable" (*achut*) low or "small" castes. The former are the land-owning agriculturalists; the latter comprise all of the service castes (blacksmiths, carpenters,

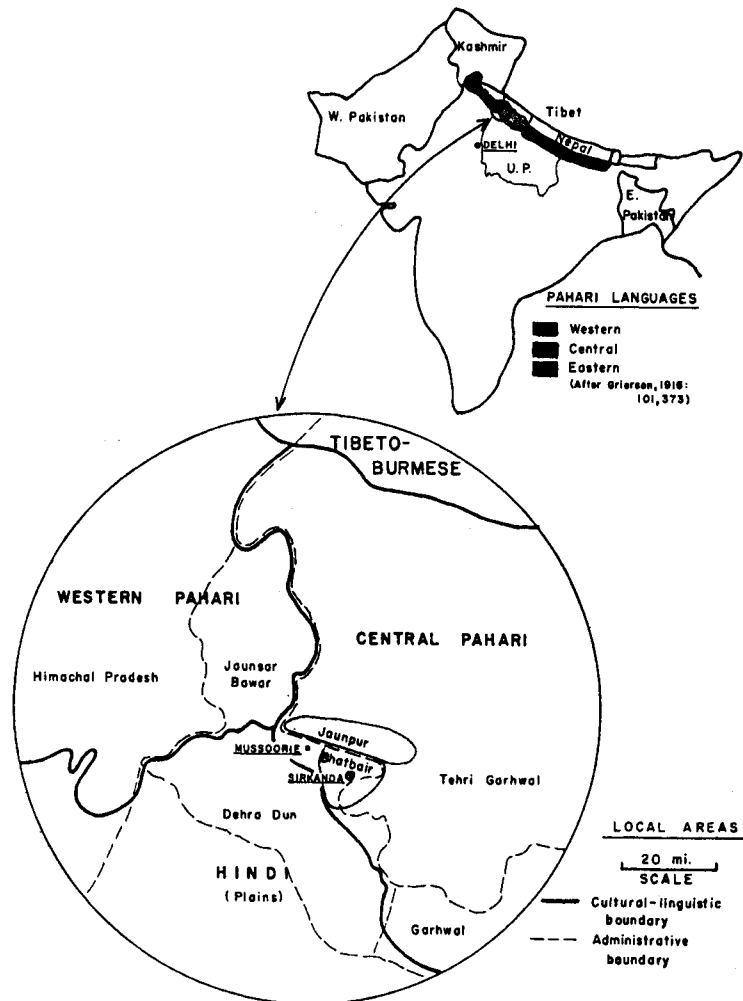


FIG. 1. Pahari language distribution, with detail of area studied.

weavers, musicians, shoemakers, and others), collectively termed Dom, and make up only about 10 percent of the population in any area. While there is hierarchical caste ranking within each of these two major categories, it is of significance primarily to those within that category. From across the high-low caste pollution barrier, it appears insignificant. The range of castes found in the hills is smaller than in the plains. Conspicuous by their absence are indigenous Vaisya (merchants) and Sudra (clean caste artisans). On the other hand, occupational variability within castes is considerable in the hills (Berreman 1959:123).

(2) A number of rules pertaining to marriage which would be unaccept-

able to many plains groups and especially to those of high caste. These include bride-price marriage with no necessity for a Sanskrit marriage ceremony, polyandry in some areas, levirate, divorce by mutual consent, remarriage of widows and divorcees, toleration of intercaste marriage within the high- or low-caste group. There is also a good deal of postmarital sexual freedom and sanctioned relations of brothers with one another's wives. Marriage is universally prohibited only in own and mother's clan, and village exogamy is not everywhere the rule.

(3) No seclusion of women and freer participation of women in most aspects of life than on the plains, including their participation in singing and dancing at festivals. Relatively free informal contact between the sexes is usual.

(4) A number of religious and ritual features such as absence of the requirement for a Sanskrit marriage ceremony and absence of the requirement for a sacred thread ceremony for high-caste boys, though such ceremonies are coming rapidly into vogue in some areas. Distinctive Pahari marriage and death ceremonies are performed. There is a great reliance upon mediums and diviners and in some areas the Brahmin priest is relatively less important than on the plains. Frequent and elaborate ritual purification and other religiously motivated acts common on the plains are less widespread in the hills. There are many distinctively Pahari religious beliefs and forms of worship. Animal sacrifice is a part of most Pahari ceremonies, and buffalo sacrifice is found in some areas. Paharis are widely known for their devotion to the Pandavas of *Mahabharata* fame and to Siva. The unique and spectacular rope-sliding ceremony is performed in honor of the latter (Berreman 1959:197 ff.).

(5) Distinctive folklore, songs, dances, and festivals.

(6) Consumption of meat and liquor by all castes.

(7) Greater flexibility of intercaste relations and freer intercaste interaction than on the plains. The caste hierarchy is important and caste status differences are actively enforced, but the rules allow considerably more contact and informal interaction than is usual in India.

(8) In addition to a nucleated settlement adjacent to a concentration of village lands there are temporary-cum-permanent dwellings on widely scattered and often distant agricultural and grazing lands. These are thought of as part of the village even when other villages intervene.

(9) Terrace agriculture with primary dependence on millets, wheat, and barley. Soil productivity is maintained by systematic fertilization, crop rotation, and fallowing. Water is scarce but wherever possible is used for irrigated rice cultivation.

(10) Dwellings of stone and timbers, often with slate roofs. Distinctive architecture of two stories with lower floor as barn and upper floor as living area, often with large open veranda or porch at the upper level.

(11) A number of artifacts including lathe-turned wooden utensils,

elaborately carved wooden porch columns, lintels, windows, etc; virtual absence of pottery.

(12) Distinctive women's dress and ornamentation, including full skirt, fitted jacket, and several types of gold and silver jewelry. Men's dress is not as distinctive and has rapidly become like that of men of the plains, but now includes a black or colored cap, a woolen blanket, and a cane as typical Pahari accoutrements.

This list is suggestive rather than exhaustive. Some items on it may not be as widespread in the hills as others, especially in the area east of Garhwal, for which there is little information. It serves to make the point, however, that this can for some purposes be considered a distinct culture area or subarea within the greater North Indian area. In view of its geographical and ecological isolation, its distinctiveness is not surprising; in view of its common heritage with the rest of North India, its basic similarity thereto is only what would be expected.

#### CULTURAL VARIABILITY IN THE PAHARI AREA

In the above description, the Pahari area has been treated as though it were inhabited by a culturally homogeneous population. At one level of generalization this is true. At others it is not. Anyone who has hiked through these hills cannot but be struck by the cultural variation which appears from locality to locality, even over relatively short distances.<sup>4</sup> This is not a unique characteristic—it is found in many parts of the world and especially where terrain makes for relative isolation of small groups, as in the hill areas of Assam, Burma, and the Philippines (cf. Leach 1954; Eggan 1941). It is, however, a striking fact; one which deserves comment and explanation.

In the vicinity of Sirkanda, cultural variation occurs at several levels. Jaunpur is an area just north and over a ridge from Sirkanda, accessible by a three to six hour hike. It may be considered a subarea comparable, and in apposition, to Bhatbair. A woman of any village in Jaunpur can be easily distinguished from one of Bhatbair by the style of her ankle bracelets, her earrings, the color of her skirt, and the cut of her jacket. If one were to see her house, it too would show minor but distinctive differences of design. Slight differences of speech are reported by those on both sides of the ridge. The pool of household and village gods from which any particular village's pantheon is drawn in Jaunpur differs somewhat from that in Bhatbair. If one inquires about the Jaunpur area and its residents among Sirkanda villagers, one finds that while they are not considered entirely alien, they are suspect. Most significantly, they are suspected of witchcraft, and this is given as a reason why marriages are arranged with them rarely and reluctantly. It is frequently pointed out by villagers that of five brides sent to that area, three died shortly of witchcraft, despite careful advance inquiry into the condition of their prospective husbands' families. There has never been a witch in Sirkanda, villagers affirm, and only one currently exists in all of the villages of Bhatbair. She, significantly

enough, lives in one of the most distant and peripheral villages of this area. Witches are plentiful, however, in Jaunpur. These are the kinds of cultural differences found between the residents of adjacent watersheds (i.e. subculture areas) who interact infrequently. Within each of these areas cultural differences are less but not entirely absent. Within Bhatbair, for example, there are some characteristic local differences in jewelry styles.

Across wider boundaries cultural differences increase. One style of large, colored beads worn by women from the area immediately beyond Jaunpur is considered mildly ludicrous in Sirkanda. A type of building used there is considered comical in that it is round instead of rectangular. A day's walk to the southeast lies a Pahari area strange enough that linguistic differences become important, though they present no great difficulty in communication. In response to inquiry as to the possibility of marital arrangements being made in that area, the following story was told about a man who went there to contract a marriage for his nephew:

In the alien village he overheard the brother of the prospective bride make a statement to his mother which, in the dialect of that region, meant "the buffalo is ready to be milked," but to the visitor it sounded like, "I am ready to have sexual intercourse." The mother replied, "then untie the calf," which in the visitor's dialect meant, "then untie your loincloth." Shocked and frightened to hear a man speak in this unseemly fashion to his mother and to receive such a reply from her, the visitor ran out of the village, headed for home. The dismayed family shouted after him, "stay, for tomorrow we will kill a goat to feast on," which only served to accelerate his departure, as in his dialect it meant, "stay, for tomorrow we will engage in sodomy." For such reasons exchange of brides is rare between areas with different dialects.

Sirkanda lies on the western edge of the Central Pahari-speaking area, as has been noted above. This linguistic boundary is a major one and corresponds closely to other kinds of cultural differences, most notably, marriage rules. Jaunsar Bawar is the area immediately to the northwest where Western Pahari is spoken. Polyandry is practiced extensively in Jaunsar Bawar and has been reported as prevalent here and there throughout the Western Pahari-speaking area (Majumdar 1944; Berreman 1960). It is not practiced in or around Sirkanda nor, so far as I am aware, is it found anywhere in the Central and Eastern Pahari areas. Therefore, the western limit of its distribution corresponds closely with an important linguistic boundary and with the several associated features such as dress, house-type, and worship which distinguish the culture of Jaunsar Bawar from that of Tehri Garhwal.

Sirkanda residents' firsthand knowledge of Jaunsar Bawar is almost nil, but their ideas about it are not inhibited by this fact. Sirkanda informants aver that Jaunsar Bawar is populated by people who not only speak an alien, albeit Pahari, language, but who are immoral and many of whom are witches or sorcerers. The country is infested with evil spirits, and even the livestock there is unusually dangerous. It is an area best avoided. That they have followed their own advice on this point accounts for the fact that they are only vaguely aware, if at all, of the less spectacular differences, such as those of architecture, dress, and worship, which obtain between their own culture and that of Jaunsar Bawar.

The cultural differences which distinguish Jaunsar Bawar from Tehri Garhwal may most plausibly be accounted for by reference to historical factors: localized developments and outside contacts. It is difficult to explain such regional peculiarities as those of language, worship, or ornamentation by reference to advantages derived from them by their possessors. The same is true of the distribution of polyandry. Its appearance has been attributed by observers to a variety of social, economic, and historical forces. But whether its distribution is a result of diffusion, indigenous development, or an earlier more widespread pattern, it seems clear that in these hills there is one basic pattern of family organization of which polyandry is a locally variant form, rather than two radically opposite and unrelated types of organization (polyandry and monandry) as is often assumed to be the case (cf. Berreman 1960). The question then becomes one of why there is so much regional variation in the culture of the Himalayan hills.

#### ANALYSIS OF VARIATION

The most general characteristic of areas of common and distinct cultures is their isolation. The Pahari area, as a whole, is isolated from neighboring areas by geographical and cultural-linguistic barriers greater than those which separate Paharis from one another. Therefore, interaction among Paharis is more frequent and intense than that between Paharis and non-Paharis. This is also the case with regard to relations within and among the various subareas that have been mentioned. Evidence for this isolation of area from area is abundant from the local level up to that of the entire hill region versus the plains.

Sirkanda villagers, for example, interact with one another more than with outsiders if for no other reason than that movement is slow and difficult in this terrain. Moreover, their contacts outside of the village are almost entirely within Bhatbair. Eighty percent of all Sirkanda marriages have been contracted within this four mile radius. Virtually all Sirkanda-owned and cultivated lands are within this area. The diviners and mediums consulted in times of trouble are all within this area. Two important intermediate markets lie on the peripheries of Bhatbair. The most important annual fair for Sirkanda villagers is a local one. These constitute the kinds of attractions which take people away from their homes: attendance at marriages and other ceremonies involving kin and friends, visits to kin including affinal relatives, trips to tend property, consultations with diviners and mediums, marketing expeditions, and attendance at the annual fair. Only trips to the larger urban centers of Dehra Dun or Mussoorie, each a day's journey away, regularly bring people out of Bhatbair. Such trips, for marketing and dealing with government officials, are made several times a year by most men and even more frequently by some. They do not, however, result in intense interaction with urbanites. They are usually brief and often uncomfortable sorties. No Sirkanda villager has friends or relatives with whom to stay or visit in either of these places—an indication of the lack of intimate contact. The night must be spent in a temple or in the shop of an indulgent merchant unless the villager can return to a



Pahari settlement before dark. If possible, trips are scheduled to make the latter alternative possible.

When Paharis do venture out to non-Pahari areas, they feel conspicuous by their rusticity and distinctive dress, language, and behavior. They are sensitive to the fact that they may be objects of ridicule. They prefer to go in groups and to avoid association with non-Paharis. When they attend a fair or market, they choose one where Paharis will be numerous. As one young Sirkanda man commented in comparing distant Delhi, which he had visited, to Dehra Dun: "I like Dehra Dun because you can always see Paharis around in the bazaar. In Delhi there were only plains people and they made fun of my Pahari cap." Another commented, "Even if we spend 200 rupees on the finest cloth and have it made into the best clothes, we still look like hill-billies when we go to town." No Sirkanda family has contracted a marriage with a non-Pahari except in two cases where women were "sold" by poor families who then lost contact with them.<sup>5</sup>

Not only do Pahari villagers avoid intensive interaction with people in non-Pahari areas, they also avoid such interaction with outsiders who come to the hills. A Pahari village is a very closed system as teachers, village level workers, and others who have dealt with such villages will readily testify. The usual reaction to a stranger is studiously to avoid and ignore him. This accounts in part for the singular lack of success with which such governmental programs as community development, rural cooperatives, and even schooling, have met in many Pahari areas. The Sirkanda teacher, a Pahari from a neighboring area to the east, complained after three months in the village that no one had invited him to a meal, brought him grain, or even inquired as to his home and family status. In a nearby village the teacher had been unable to establish a school despite a potential student body of over 50 pupils. Government forestry officers were warned to bring their own food, water, and bed rolls in this area, for the hospitality to strangers characteristic of plains people is lacking. Few outsiders succeed in establishing effective contact at all with villagers in this area. As a result, alien customs and beliefs are slow to influence those of the Paharis.

The Pahari culture area is, therefore, largely isolated from the non-Pahari area to the south. Contacts between the two are infrequent and unintensive. The same is true, to a lesser degree, of contacts among subareas within the Pahari region. At one level, Tehri Garhwal may be considered a culture area as distinct from Jaunsar Bawar to the west. The distinction, as described above, is evidenced by a number of cultural differences, prominent among which are language and marriage rules. Contact across this boundary is relatively slight. No Sirkanda villager has been to Jaunsar Bawar, 15 air-miles to the north-west, although people of the two areas occasionally meet and interact at markets or fairs, primarily in Mussoorie. Jaunsar Bawar is considered to be a strange and dangerous land. Equally distant parts of Tehri Garhwal to the east, however, are not strange at all. The latter is the ancestral home of Sirkanda villagers. Most have been there occasionally to visit kin or attend

marriages and funerals. About five percent of all marriages have been contracted in Tehri Garhwal at distances comparable to that of Jaunsar Bawar, which has furnished no marriage partners. Sirkanda lies on and near important trade routes between interior Tehri Garhwal and the valley, so people from that area are not infrequent visitors. There is no occasion for Jaunsar Bawar residents to pass by Sirkanda or vice versa. Interaction is, therefore, relatively frequent within Tehri Garhwal, and very infrequent across into Jaunsar Bawar. This is not to deny that there is a transitional zone, but only to assert that it is a relatively narrow one. This situation may reflect an earlier period of greater geographical isolation of the two areas. Sirkanda village has probably existed for only about 300 years. Prior to that its residents came from Tehri Garhwal to the east and ultimately, perhaps, from Kumaon farther east (Berreman 1959:47). It is thus possible that the two populations, though of common origin, were isolated from one another for some time by an unpopulated area or one populated by peoples now gone or absorbed into other groups. If that is the case, contact between them has been re-established relatively recently after the westward migration of people from Tehri Garhwal.

On a more restricted local level, there are differences between nearby Jaunpur and Bhatbair as cited above. Contacts are less between than within Jaunpur and Bhatbair, though contacts between these areas are more frequent and intense than those across the plains-Pahari and Jaunsar Bawar-Tehri Garhwal boundaries. No land is owned in Jaunpur by Sirkanda people. No markets in Jaunpur are frequented by Sirkanda people, though common markets on the border are attended regularly by residents of both areas. No Jaunpur fairs or religious ceremonies or religious practitioners attract Sirkanda residents. Few marriages have been arranged across this boundary.<sup>6</sup> Visits to Jaunpur are limited to those among kin and to occasional visits by Jaunpur residents en route to the valley to do business.

Paharis ascribe their localism to the terrain, and this is certainly a factor. A Sirkanda man remarked, "On the plains it is easy to travel and they go great distances for brides. Here it is very difficult to get around so we have to find ours closer to our own village. It is as hard to go one mile here as it is to go five miles in the plains on foot and many places there they can go by motor bus or at least by cart." Trail miles are at least double the air distances, and they are generally rough and steep. Sixteen trail miles is a day's journey and this is the round trip distance within which 80 percent of all Sirkanda marriages are contracted.

Terrain, then, is in part responsible for the isolation of group from group. Isolation means less frequent and less intense interaction or communication among groups. As a result, there is greater opportunity for development of locally variant cultural forms such as have been described above.

Equally important isolating factors are socio-cultural ones. It might be asked, for example, why residents of Bhatbair and Jaunsar Bawar are more like one another than those of either area are like their non-Pahari neighbors to

the south. It is a fact that Bhatbair residents go frequently to the non-Pahari area and virtually never to Jaunsar Bawar, although residents of the two areas meet occasionally and there is indirect contact through the transitional zone separating the two.

The obvious answer is that historically Paharis have a common origin and a cultural tradition which is distinct from that of the plains. Their common culture has been modified locally but not obliterated by the differential contacts and developments consequent upon their dispersion. Another factor is, however, that even infrequent or seemingly casual contacts among Paharis may be more effective in accomplishing communication than more frequent contacts between Paharis and non-Paharis. The reason is that Paharis meet one another to a large extent on common cultural ground and on terms of equality. They understand one another not only in language but in total behavior patterns. They share common definitions of the situations in which they meet. Pahari-non-Pahari contacts always involve a lack of communication and understanding at many levels. Above all, the Pahari feels himself to be at a disadvantage in terms of knowledge, sophistication, and prestige in such situations. Truly informal contact between the groups is almost impossible. They are simply too different. As a result, Paharis do not identify themselves as people who can learn or benefit from the ways of people of the plains. The traditional Pahari attitude is expressed in their frequent comment: "That's all right for plains people, but it would never work here. The hills and hill people are different." This enables Paharis to have frequent contacts with non-Paharis without adopting many of their ways. Thus, there are different kinds or qualities of contact which make frequency of contact alone an inadequate criterion of isolation and communication. Occasional intra-Pahari contacts may serve to maintain a good deal more communication and hence cultural homogeneity than more frequent Pahari-non-Pahari contacts. It probably takes less intensive interaction to maintain common culture than to change it. Casual contacts may be more effective in maintaining cultural similarities among similar groups than in causing radically different groups to become similar.

Relative isolation, therefore, has allowed independent cultural developments in the hills vis-à-vis the plains and in Bhatbair vis-à-vis Jaunsar Bawar. The latter isolation has been less extreme than the former largely because of the quality of the contacts involved and the cultural context in which they have occurred. Before elaborating on the implications of isolation for culture change, its usefulness in understanding other features of Pahari culture will be investigated in the hope of demonstrating its wider significance.

#### CROSS-CASTE CULTURAL HOMOGENEITY

There is striking cultural homogeneity from caste to caste within the Pahari locality in which the author worked. There one finds, for example, that the high-caste Brahmins and Rajputs have the same dietary habits as the un-

touchable blacksmiths and musicians. All worship the same gods in the same ways. All patronize the same diviners and mediums. All perform the same ceremonies. All wear the same clothing and ornamentation. Differences which exist are primarily those brought about by differences in wealth and by high-caste sanctions to maintain the caste hierarchy. In the latter category are prohibitions against low-caste worship in temples, former restrictions against certain types of dress and ornament for low castes, former restrictions against land ownership among low castes, and the like. It is my impression, without having engaged in intensive research on the subject, that there are very few if any caste-specific linguistic differences among indigenous Pahari groups in the Bhatbair area, although there are honorific forms required of low-caste people in greeting high-caste members.<sup>7</sup> This contrasts with the plains situation where cultural differences among castes of the same village community are prominent features and where such differences are reflected in language differences (Gumperz 1958).

This Pahari feature—intercaste cultural homogeneity—is unusual in the Indian context, but is not surprising when viewed in the same light as regional variability. It is, in fact, what would be expected as the obverse effect of the same factors which lead to regional variation in culture.

In Pahari villages (at least in Tehri Garhwal) low castes rarely make up more than 10 percent of the total population. Often each low caste, or even each caste other than the dominant Rajput or Brahmin group, is represented by only a single family in those villages where it occurs at all. While each low caste will normally be represented within an area, each caste is not represented in every village. More importantly, there are not nearby and easily accessible villages in these rugged mountains. It often requires an arduous journey for a minority-caste person just to see a caste-fellow, and such journeys are not frequently made. If day-to-day social interaction is to occur at all for minority-caste people, it must occur across caste boundaries. Caste-fellows are simply too few and too inaccessible.<sup>8</sup> Within the Pahari context this is easily done and is apparently the rule. For, while caste interaction is restricted and these restrictions are enforced, the rules are relatively flexible and permissive in comparison to those common to the plains area.

In Sirkanda, low-caste people cannot normally enter high-caste houses nor sit on the same cot nor eat with high-caste people. However, there are numerous opportunities for informal social interaction. Low-caste people can sit on the step or door sill of high-caste houses. Since an open veranda serves as living room, they can participate quite fully in social situations without entering the house. On the other hand, it is not unusual for a low-caste man to be asked in to the veranda (never the kitchen) of such a house to share in a drinking party—an occasion when normal rules are relaxed. Informal drinking groups of men are often multi-caste groups. Since high-caste people feel no compunction on entering a low-caste home, a drinking party may be held there. In addition, there are many caste-neutral places in the village where

much informal social interaction takes place: shops, the places of work of artisans, the village water source, yards of houses, the fields and forests where people work, a large stone fortification left from some earlier era and now used as a place to sit and view the countryside. In these places people gather to talk without regard for caste. Children's playgroups are intercaste in composition, including the whole range of indigenous castes. Often men and/or women work in one another's company without caste distinctions. When cooperative labor is called for, as when a house-beam is to be lifted, roof tile is to be transported, or rice is to be transplanted, caste is ignored in the composition of the group. The most notorious Bhatbair woman-selling gang of 30 years ago was made up of three men who worked in close concert sharing the risks and profits—a Brahmin, a Rajput, and an untouchable. The surviving Brahmin is now a respected elder and priest. When someone wishes to travel to another village, or more especially to a market or an urban area, he attempts to find a traveling companion, and caste is of little importance. In the presence of strangers Paharis seek mutual support regardless of caste. All castes may, and generally do, watch religious ceremonies carried out in the village, except those held inside high-caste homes.

Ritual pollution does not pose the threat of inconvenience to high-caste Paharis that it does to plains people. It occurs only as a result of such unlikely contacts as commensality, a contaminated tobacco pipe or water vessel, entrance of a low-caste person into a high-caste home, and more especially into its kitchen. Such contamination is rare, so the need for purification is rare. Objects are occasionally contaminated, but in this area individuals almost never are.

On the plains, by contrast, intercaste interaction is more limited, especially when status differences are great. There are often larger numbers of caste-fellows within a village or at least in neighboring and easily accessible settlements than is true in the hills. There are fewer opportunities for frequent and intensive intercaste contacts as a result of more stringent rules restricting such contacts. Pollution occurs more easily and entails more inconvenience for the high-caste plainsman. Informal contacts across the "pollution barrier" are few. Gumperz (1958:679) reports that even children's playgroups exclude touchable-untouchable contacts. Consequently, most social interaction on the plains occurs within the caste or among closely similar castes, and this frequently involves interaction across village lines.

Thus, in the hills there is little opportunity for cultural differences to arise or to be maintained among castes simply because there is little intercaste isolation in any one locality. On the plains the situation is reversed; caste isolation is the rule and intercaste cultural differences, especially across the pollution barrier, result. Common culture, like common language, depends upon the interaction of those who share it. As Bloomfield (1933:46) has noted, "the most important differences of speech within a community are due to differences in *density of communication*."

Frequency of contact alone, however, is not sufficient to determine degree of cultural homogeneity among castes or ethnic groups any more than it is among culture areas. Gumperz (1958:681) found that dialectal differences between castes in a plains village depended not on the number of intercaste contacts but on their form. Work contacts (i.e., employer-employee relations) showed no correlation with linguistic differences. Informal friendship contacts seemed to be determinative. Mandelbaum reports that among the Todas, Badagas, Kotas, and Kurumbas of the Nilgiri Hills, "Although contact was frequent, social intercourse was confined to a fixed number of narrowly defined activities. Any intimate contact, of a kind which would allow members of one group to mingle freely with another, was stringently tabooed" (Mandelbaum 1941:20). As a result, the groups remained culturally distinct. Obviously, then, the kind and intensity of interaction is important. It is in this respect, perhaps even more than in frequency, that Pahari intercaste relations differ from those on the plains. Characteristically, such contacts on the plains are formal, "contractual," restricted in scope and content, and are accompanied by a good deal of inhibition on both sides. In contrast, in the Pahari area they are more often informal, intensive, and extensive. Plains castes exclude one another from knowledge of, and participation in, their problems and ways of life; Paharis exclude outsiders but are little concerned with concealing their affairs from local members of other castes. Pahari castes are thus not "closed subgroups" to the extent that plains castes tend to be.

The accompanying diagram (Fig. 2) may help make clear the contrasts in plains and Pahari interaction patterns and hence cultural differentiation by caste and locality. In this diagram broken arrows indicate limited interaction, solid arrows indicate extensive and intensive, informal interaction. Interaction in plains culture tends to be horizontal (i.e., within the caste and across local boundaries), while Pahari interaction tends to be vertical (i.e., within the local area and across caste boundaries). Not shown here is the fact that interaction within a local caste group (or perhaps even among different castes of

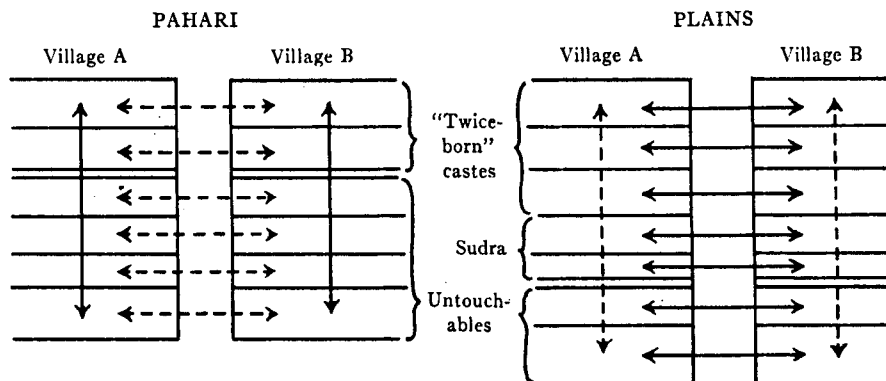


FIG. 2. Contrasting interaction patterns.

similar status in a locality) is probably in all cases greater than that between castes or communities.

Isolation is a factor which sheds some light on another feature, namely, the greater regional distinctiveness evidenced in the dress and ornamentation of women as compared to men. Aside from language (which might well show some sexual difference, too), the most sensitive indicator of regional affiliation in the hills is probably women's costume. A factor which contributes to this is the fact that women travel outside of their husbands' villages rarely, except for occasional visits to their parents' villages. Men travel more widely and more frequently. Since women are relatively isolated from women of other localities, the women's subculture tends to be more localized than that of men. This seems to be true on the plains as well.

Thus, the degree of cultural difference found among the castes, areas, and perhaps even between the sexes, as reported here, varies directly with their degree of isolation from one another, defined in terms of rate and quality of interaction and determined by social and physical accessibility. This is not to assert that where it occurs social isolation is always the causal factor. Cultural differences may bring about social isolation as well as the reverse. Moreover, the differences that have been cited here between caste and areal distinctiveness in the plains and in the hills are quantitative rather than qualitative. Isolation and interaction are relative matters which vary with frequency and intensity of contact among groups. There are culture areas on the plains as well as in the hills, but they tend there to be larger and perhaps their transition zones are more gradual. Similarly, there are intercaste cultural differences in the hills, but they are less than on the plains.

#### CULTURAL DRIFT

The importance of isolation to biological evolution has long been recognized and has been cited as the necessary mechanism for genetic drift (Wright 1929:560; Boyd 1950:155). Sapir (1921:150) noted its importance in dialectation or linguistic drift. Redfield (1941:349f.) is among those who have commented that isolation is necessary for the development of any distinctive culture, and from the beginning the idea has been implicit in the work of those who have used the concept of culture area (Wissler 1938; Kroeber 1939). But its relevance to cultural variability has not been made explicit.

Isolation is a necessary but not sufficient explanation for the origin and maintenance of cultural differences. A broader concept such as "cultural drift" (or perhaps "cultural divergence") gives promise of greater utility (cf. Herskovits 1951:580ff.). Here I mean a process exactly parallel to that of linguistic drift and analogous in many respects to genetic drift (Sapir 1921:147ff.; Wright 1929).<sup>9</sup> These terms describe the process whereby subgroups diverge from the main stream of characteristics shared by the larger group of which they were a part—the "stock" or "cultural substratum" (Smith 1952:93)—and develop along independent lines. Cultural drift may be described as the process of divergent or differential cultural change.

Cultural change, like genetic evolution, comes about as a result of *variation*, *selection*, and *transmission*, while drift or divergent change requires the additional condition of *isolation*, i.e., relative lack of communication among the groups involved.

*Variation*—the occurrence of changes and alternatives—is a continuous and inevitable process in every culture. It results from various processes, the uniform psychological aspects of which Barnett (1953) has described as innovation. Change or innovation is impelled especially but not exclusively by contact with alien ways of life, by the stresses resulting from new or changing physical and socio-cultural environments, and by chronic discontinuities in or between social and cultural integration (cf. Geertz 1957; Opler 1959; Vogt 1960). Sources of variation which have led to Pahari cultural distinctiveness have been sought by commentators in such diverse factors as climate, topography, the heritage from Indo-Aryan invaders and their indigenous predecessors, contacts with Tibetans, and contact with people of the plains of North India.

From among the inevitably vast range of variations available to the carriers of a culture there must be *selection*. Selection determines the direction of cultural change or drift. It depends ultimately upon the choices made by people in the context of their total social-cultural-physical environment of which the value system is an important aspect (cf. Vogt 1960:25f.). Selection may be purposeful or not; conscious, as in the case of adoption of Sanskrit rituals by Paharis, or unconscious as in linguistic drift (cf. Sapir 1921:155).

*Transmission* is, of course, necessary to pass on within the group the selected variants along with the rest of culture. It is achieved with varying degrees of efficiency through processes subsumed under such titles as socialization and enculturation.

For cultures to diverge from a common stock and become distinctive subcultures, some degree of *isolation* is required. Two groups are isolated from one another to the degree that contacts between their members are infrequent, restricted, superficial, formalized—in short, neither intensive nor extensive. Without isolation, interaction leads to common experience and consequent common culture. This is the crux of the argument of this paper. The Pahari culture area and those smaller subareas within it have become distinct as a result of cultural drift in general and isolation in particular. Plains castes have become or remained culturally distinct as a result of isolation from one another while Pahari castes have become or remained culturally homogeneous because of their intimate contact with one another on the local level. Change can occur in the content of any culture, language, or biological race; differential change or drift can occur only in isolated subgroups.<sup>10</sup>

#### CULTURE AREAS

Isolation is rarely absolute. Degrees of isolation correlate with degrees of divergence or drift. Culture areas, therefore, exist only to the extent that there is effective isolation, lack of communication, among groups. The distinctness



of a culture area or cultural group corresponds with the degree, duration, and kind of isolation of the people involved. Those who attempt to delimit such areas or groups are faced with the same taxonomic problem which faces the dialectologist and the population geneticist. That is, what kind or degree of difference is to be adjudged critical. Differences and similarities occur at many levels. Just as no two people speak exactly alike, their patterns of behavior and belief differ. Roberts (1951) has demonstrated cultural differences even in adjacent and closely related households. In discussing cultural affiliations of Sirkanda residents, one could defend as valid their membership in any or all of the following "culture areas": North India, Pahari, Central Pahari, Garhwal, Tehri Garhwal, Bhatbair. Others could be delimited including some cross-cutting these. Groups peripheral to some of these areas might be located centrally in culture areas defined by different criteria.

Drift and diffusion are not uniform and culture elements are not rigidly linked to one another. Therefore the boundaries of distribution of various traits or patterns—the "isotraits," "isoelements," or "isopatterns" as they might be called—do not always coincide. They often have varying or even independent distributions. Here it has been shown that polyandry and Western Pahari speech have a common eastern boundary in the Himalayan hills. Their distribution is not, however, identical. Leach (1954:48) has reported cases where language and other aspects of culture have independent distributions. Dialect geographers are familiar with nonconforming isoglosses. "Almost every feature of phonetics, lexicon, or grammar has its own area of prevalence—is bounded by its own isogloss" (Bloomfield 1933:328).<sup>11</sup> Population geneticists meet the same problems with isogenes (Boyd 1950:204, 226).

The cultural geographer has to decide what elements are to be used, their relative weighting and the number and degree of correspondences (i.e., bunching) of isoelements required to define a cultural or subcultural boundary. His choices will depend largely upon his purposes and will affect the precision with which the culture areas he designates can be delineated. The distinctness of culture areas depends both on the criteria used in determining them and on the conditions of isolation and contact among those to whom the criteria are applied. In some regions, such as the Himalayan hills, culture areas can be sharply and consistently differentiated, with narrow transition zones. In others, such as the plains of North India, they may be less sharply demarcated, with broad transition areas.

There can be no single correct way to define a culture area or cultural group. A broad definition might parallel that of the geneticists' definitions of race, e.g., "a population which differs significantly from other human populations in regard to the frequency of one or more of the genes it possesses" (Boyd 1950:207). Thus "culture area" might refer to the area inhabited by people or social groups who share more culture content (including social structure) or more of particular elements of culture content with one another than with those outside of the area, the amount and kind of common culture to be decided on the basis of the problem to be studied. A cultural group could be

defined similarly without the areal criterion. Such a definition allows the flexibility to conceive of culture areas or groups at various levels of abstraction. It implies no judgment, for example, as to the relative validity of designating Bhatbair, Garhwal, and North India as culture areas. Each is a relatively homogeneous culture area isolated from comparable areas.

Another complicating factor in determining culture areas and affinities lies in their variability through time (cf. Steward 1955:82f.). Cultures are constantly changing at all levels; drift and diffusion are continuous processes. Kind and degree of isolation, sources of variation, criteria of selection, methods of transmission, are all subject to constant change with resultant changes in the distribution of traits and patterns. In Sirkanda the adoption of new Brahmanical or Sanskritic ceremonies is proceeding continuously in all castes at present. In this respect, the area is coming increasingly into the orbit of the plains culture area. Leach (1954) describes continual cultural variations in the population of the Kachin Hills of Burma. A culture area is a static model which, like a photograph, picks one configuration out of a moving scene and immortalizes it. It must be recognized and treated as such.<sup>12</sup> However accurate it may have been, it has changed as soon as it has been observed.

There is also the problem of cultural variation among social groups within an area. Among plains castes in India, for example, there are significant cultural differences on different status levels within the same area, and various castes may form different culture areas. Drift and diffusion may occur at different rates and in different directions among various groups in a region. In this case a multi-dimensional model or a series of overlays are required to depict cultural distributions simultaneously by areas and groups. This is also a problem in mapping dialectal and racial distributions. It makes especially necessary explicit description of the populations and defining characteristics which have been used in setting up any culture area.

These complexities do not make the concept of culture area useless any more than they do the concepts of dialect or biological race. They do put them in proper perspective as abstract configurations drawn from a continuum of variations over time, space, and among socially defined groups.

Finally, the use of cultural traits or patterns to trace cultural drift, to define culture areas and groups, may be criticized on grounds that this obscures more important cultural wholes or leads to neglect of crucial information. This is a frequently recognized problem. Kroeber (1939:2) notes that his study of cultural areas in North America ". . . deals with culture wholes, and not, except incidentally, with culture elements or 'traits,' nor with those associations of elements which are sometimes called 'culture complexes' but which constitute only a fraction of the entirety of any one culture." Distributions of overall configurations rather than of traits are the subject of interest in most culture area studies just as they are the ultimate referents in many linguistic and genetic distribution studies. Particular items are selected, in most cases, merely as convenient indicators of cultural (or linguistic or racial) similarities,

differences, distributions, and changes which, with present techniques, cannot be adequately studied as wholes. It is therefore more generally a methodological problem than a conceptual one. Perhaps multivariant analysis or a scheme grouping cultural components into broad categories (cf. Opler 1960) will eventually enable us to study cultures as wholes, or at least take us farther in that direction. This would alleviate the distortions so common under present methodology. For the time being, however, the crude groupings which result from culture area studies are subject either to the limitations inherent in the study of a few elements or patterns selected from the universe of cultural data and divorced to some extent from their cultural context, or to the limitations inherent in the subjective comparison of total configurations. In the study of cultural distributions one has to choose the methodology which seems most feasible in terms of the data and most defensible in terms of the problem and these limitations.

#### CONCLUSION

Herskovits (1951:582) has noted that drift is a concept which “. . . despite its usefulness for the study of culture, has been strangely neglected by most cultural anthropologists.” This paper has been an effort towards enhancing its usefulness as a descriptive and analytical device by defining its operation more explicitly than has been done previously. An attempt has also been made to relate this dynamic concept to the classificatory concept of culture area. The latter may be made more useful by viewing cultural variation not only as a problem in population movement and diffusion, but also as a result of the continuing process of cultural drift as defined here; of culture change in conditions of inter-group isolation with consequent divergence. Further research into the conditions and effects of isolation of varying kinds and degrees, the associated types and intensities of interaction, the sources of variation, the criteria and processes of selection, and the processes of transmission, should increase the usefulness of such a model as cultural drift for the study of cultural change.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The research was supported by a Ford Foundation fellowship during 15 months of 1957-58 and is reported in full in: Berreman 1959. The author has, in addition to the area reported here, some familiarity with other parts of Tehri Garhwal to the east and with the Punjab hills as far west as Simla. He would like to thank John J. Gumperz for his helpful comments on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> There are roughly 3,200,000 speakers of Western and Central Pahari (Berreman 1959:41). Eastern Pahari, better known as Nepali, is spoken only in Nepal.

<sup>3</sup> There has been considerably more contact in Nepal than elsewhere in the Pahari area, but I know little of the effects of this contact. What is said here, therefore, applies more substantially to the Central and Western Pahari areas.

<sup>4</sup> In citing examples of such variations in order to explain them, my own materials will be used. It is my impression from some observation and from the sparse literature on the area, however, that such variation is even more prominent in the Punjab hills west of the region reported here (cf. Rosser 1955, as an extreme case). This perhaps reflects a longer period of settlement there. Cultural variation in these hills is associated with political fragmentation. They have long been

divided into many "kingdoms," or feudal estates, some extremely minute. The extent of these units very likely correlates to some degree with culture areas.

<sup>5</sup> In addition, a barber family of non-Pahari origin but long resident in Sirkanda has sent some brides out to the nearby Dehra Dun valley in order to marry them within the caste.

<sup>6</sup> About 3 percent of all Sirkanda marriages have been contracted in Jaunpur as compared to 80 percent within Bhatbair. Such local isolation in marriage relations is not unique to Sirkanda or Bhatbair. Majumdar (1955:172) reports, for example, that in a village of Jaunsar Bawar, 92 percent of the Rajput marriages were contracted within 12 miles of the village.

<sup>7</sup> In the past 15 years a few representatives of an alien shoemaker caste from the Punjab hills (Kangra) have come into this area where formerly there were no shoemakers. These people are western Paharis, culturally and linguistically distinct from Bhatbair groups. They have not been allowed to settle in extant villages nor to interact freely or informally with other castes, but they are tolerated in the area as useful artisans. As aliens, the shoemakers do not fit into the local culture nor the local caste hierarchy so they are socially isolated. Their unclean occupation has contributed heavily to this isolation—they are considered uniquely defiling and untouchable by all local castes. The discussion in this article excludes this caste of unclean outsiders.

The one indigenous Muslim family of Bhatbair is, on the other hand, treated as any other indigenous low caste. The one family of barbers, brought from the neighboring plains at the founding of the village and now almost entirely assimilated, is also treated as an indigenous low caste. The barbers can marry into either of two local low castes and may become assimilated into one of these in time.

<sup>8</sup> Gumperz (1958:680) found in a plains village that among the least populous "middle castes," informal intercaste contact was more frequent than among the more populous high and low castes.

<sup>9</sup> A more accurate, but more unwieldy, term would be "socio-cultural drift" since as used here "cultural drift" applies equally to social structural phenomena and cultural content.

One important difference between cultural and genetic drift is that the latter as usually defined is the result of chance variations in gene frequencies. If a selective advantage operates it is, by definition, not drift. In cultural drift, as I am using it, selective advantage or selection is not ruled out and, in fact, plays an important role in determining the direction of the drift.

<sup>10</sup> "Now dialects arise not because of the mere fact of individual variation but because two or more groups of individuals have become sufficiently disconnected to drift apart, or independently, instead of together. So long as they keep strictly together, no amount of individual variation would lead to the formation of dialects" (Sapir 1921:150-151).

<sup>11</sup> In determining culture areas the procedure followed by Wissler (1938: 219ff.) and that used later in the trait distribution studies of Kroeber and his associates bore similarities to the procedures used by dialect geographers (cf. McDavid 1958:498f.). Gumperz (1960) has discussed in detail problems of dialect geography and their relevance to culture areas and groups.

<sup>12</sup> "Recently, a new interest in the culture area has developed, and with it an attempt to add a dynamic dimension and utilize its potentialities more carefully. Bennett (1948), working with Andean materials, introduced the concept of areal co-tradition, a taxonomic tool for classifying one of the ways culture areas develop through time" (Schwartz 1959:1060). See also Smith (1952) and Ehrlich (1956).

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