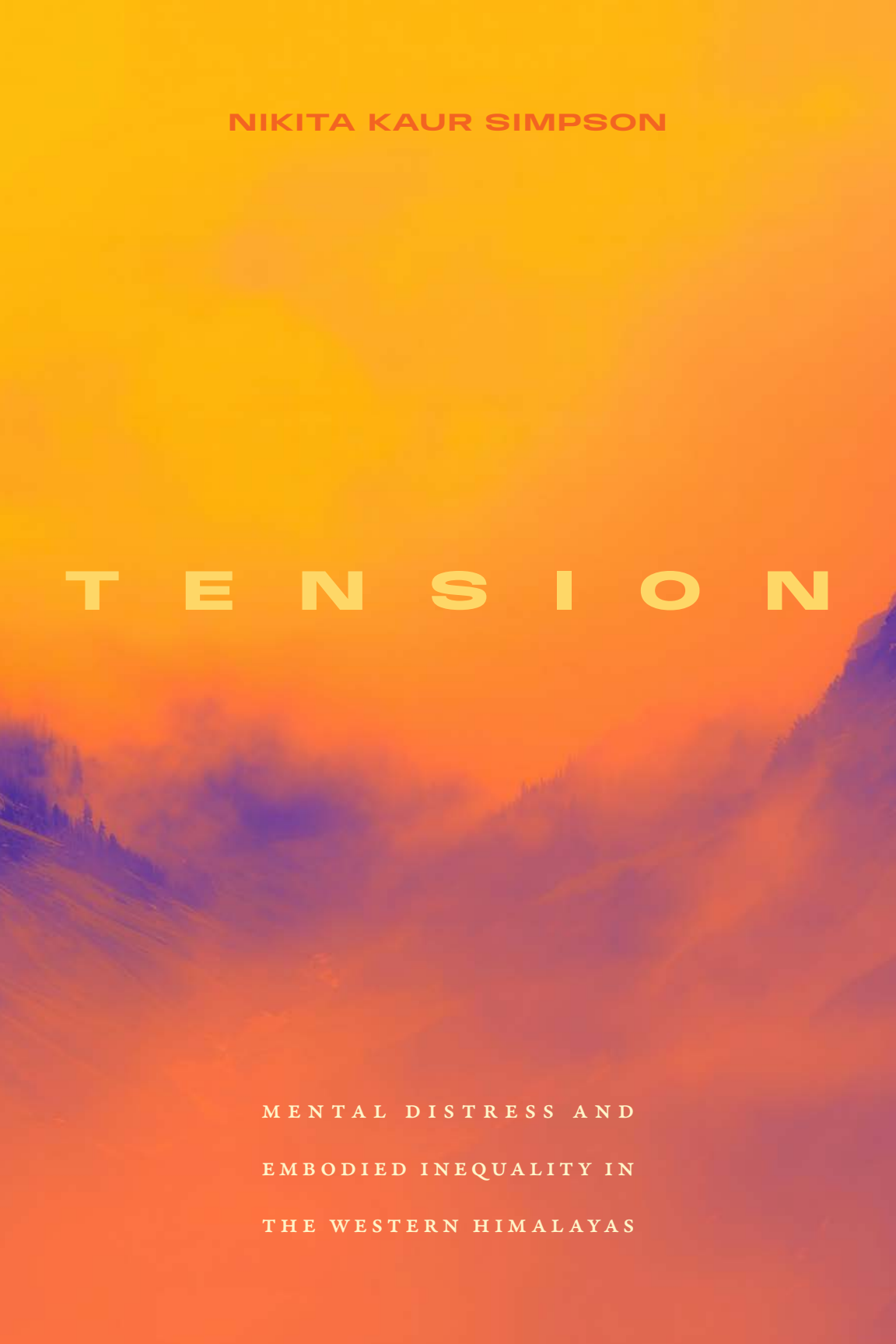
NIKITA KAUR SIMPSON

TENSION



MENTAL DISTRESS AND EMBODIED INEQUALITY IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS

Tension

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Mental Distress and Embodied Inequality in the Western Himalayas

NIKITA KAUR SIMPSON

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Frontispiece: A flock coming down from Sach Pass. Spring migration from the Chamba side of the Dhaula Dhar to Chandrabhaga Valley. Photograph by Christina Noble, 1979.

Cover art: Soujanyaa Boruah, *CloudsRollingUp*. Courtesy of the artist.

For Avtar and Pritpal, who brought me here,
And Shyam and Soujanyaa, who found me.

Hathe goai hinde hadna aaye

You try to whistle back that which you
let slip from your hand.

—GADDI PROVERB

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Author's Note

Throughout this book, most place-names have been changed, with the exception of cities such as Dharamsala and districts such as Kangra and Chamba. All names are pseudonyms, and many accounts have had defining characteristics altered or excised to protect the anonymity of those with whom I spoke. Field notes and accounts have also been anonymized and sometimes cut into multiple accounts.

Fieldwork for this book was conducted in Gaddi dialect, Hindi, and English. I have refrained from using any conventional style for the transliteration of phrases or words. I have used identifiable English-language spellings for words from Hindi and Gaddi that appear frequently, as well as for individuals, places, names, deities, and institutions.

Even when speaking Gaddi or Hindi, my interlocutors consistently used the English word *tension* when speaking of their distress. I italicize this term and also the term *BP* throughout to remind the reader that I'm using these words with their local meanings, not their standard English meanings.

The stories within may be distressing for some readers. They include accounts of death, sexual abuse, rape, violence, and severe mental illness. Readers who may be triggered by these accounts are encouraged to exercise care.

This book includes accounts of some individuals who are now deceased, and permission has been sought from their relatives to tell their stories, where appropriate. All photographs taken by the author were taken with the permission of those who feature within them.

Preface: A Mother's Body

The first time my mother collapsed, we were on a summer holiday. I remember her dark skin quivering before her legs buckled. Her blood pressure had skyrocketed so high, my father said, that she could have had a stroke. On that summer's day, we were crammed into a room that overlooked an Italian lake, an operatic backdrop to the scene. It happened while she was fighting with her sister, and the wind was so strong that it almost drowned out their voices. It took her five long minutes to come around. My aunt stroked her hair.

I have always thought of my mother's body as consubstantial with my own. I have never known how to articulate our mutuality, an unknowing that propels me. Her skin is my skin; together we are exposed to the world. Through her touch, she absorbs her children's worries. Our excesses are held in her fascia and joints, causing them to become stiff. As her body has fallen apart, I have always felt that it was because of me, because of us.

She lost her first tooth after she breastfed me. Leached of calcium, the hard enamel crumbled like cheese. She lost three more, one with each child. She mostly laughs about the holes now, but sometimes I catch her grimacing as she tongues the gummy flesh in the back of her mouth.

My mother is a pediatric geneticist. She diagnoses tiny babies born with abnormalities, infants who begin seizing as they enter the world. She works with parents who have had one, two, three children with the same catastrophic illnesses. What is the loss of a few teeth in comparison? she always says. But these babies take a bit of her too. She goes to the funerals of all of those who don't survive.

Her bones followed her teeth, becoming brittle and fragile. She first felt the pain when she, my brother, and I were visiting my aunt in London. I must have been eleven, and my brother nine. While my aunt was at work, my mother took

us to Hyde Park to go horse riding. It was May, and the park was dense with life, but the air was chilly and entered my mother's bones. It never left.

My mother was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, or a general atopic autoimmune connective tissue disorder. But a lot of her pains aren't captured by this label. Especially the parts related to care.

It got worse around the time that my grandparents were in a car accident. I was in my first year of university, fifteen thousand kilometers away. They were picking my brother up from school, and my grandfather pushed the accelerator instead of the brake. My grandmother broke eleven ribs, and her lung collapsed. My mother slept with her in the hospital until she could come home, then watched every day as she blew into a little machine that made a ball float. It was meant to show that her lungs were strengthening, but I always felt like it was my mother's strength that held the ball in the air.

My mother's body is a weathervane. She can divine a great storm coming from subtle changes in moisture and heat in the atmosphere. Somehow, her body is more porous, more permeable than others—maybe from all those years of care. Things were bad one summer, as La Niña washed over Australia's east coast, bringing the wettest summer on record. When I woke up in London, I could sense her level of pain by reading the weather forecast in Sydney.

When the pain gets too much, she asks my sister to sit on her legs. The compression, she says, gives her some relief. Hot masala tea also helps, and fizzy water. I had these ready for her when she came to visit me when I was doing my fieldwork, high up in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas. She thought she was coming to look after me again, to give me a break from the stories I was hearing day after day about distress and illness. I thought that her pain had nothing to do with these stories of distress and illness. But, unlike the women in these stories, when my mother arrived, her body slowed, her joints released. She slept in, I made her tea, and she would sit in our kitchen as we sliced vegetables and made *dal*-rice. She rested, for a moment.

I BEGIN THIS BOOK with my mother's body because it is where I first encountered the slippery ways in which distress accumulates across generations and crosses from atmospheres and relations into joints, bones, and flesh. Through her endless acts of care and listening, of cleaning and feeding, she holds her parents, her sister, her children, and her patients. But this takes something from her. These acts are life-affirming, but they are also depleting. I saw the same

dynamic in almost every woman, and many men, whom I encountered during my fieldwork in rural North India between 2017 and 2019 with people from the Gaddi community. Their bodies held vast networks of relationships and absorbed the distress of intimate others from past and present. But this act of holding relations left their bodies wrecked and their minds wracked. Until I arrived in the foothills of the Himalayas, I didn't think there was a word for this kind of relational distress. Until I encountered *tension*.

Introduction

WHAT IS *TENSION*?

Dev Bhumi

To get up into the mountains, we always took the road through the slate mines. This used to be a road that snaked from the village into the mines, out of which trucks brought trailers full of well-trimmed slates. The road was built with the financing of Mr. Robert Barkley Shaw, a British investor who commenced mining operations in 1867 through the establishment of the Kangra Valley Slate Company. For a time, Shaw's road made the surrounding Pahari villages rich; some say they were "the richest villages in all of South Asia." But now the road crumbles every monsoon season when the river rises and brings down debris from explosions upstream. The result is a wound in the ancient hills—kilometers of rugged slates, huge slabs, and tiny chips piled into human-made mountains that you must scramble up and down to get to the tree line. The slates crunch under your feet, and you slide and tumble down with them. The trick is to remain

FIGURE 1.1. The Dhaula Dhar mountains at dusk, taken from the plains below. Photograph by Nikita Kaur Simpson, 2024.

nimble, moving your weight from one foot to another so that the push of your foot is equivalent to the push back of the slates. It is different from the way you navigate hill walking.

Once when we were crossing from the road onto the slates, Shankar—my Gaddi research companion—caught my arm. He pointed across the ravine to a cavern that lay just under a cliff in the adjacent mountain. My eyes, weakened by years of close reading, couldn't follow his line of sight and kept circling the spot. But finally, I saw it—a dark streak of blood—brownish against the orange of the cut rock. Around the streak a number of tiny dark dots circled, vultures with wingspans longer than a human is tall. A horse had died—injured and then killed while carrying packs of slate on its back along the high mountain road from the mine to the yard in the nearby village where it is sold. Its death was so silent, up there high on the ridge, the birds' calls lost against the sound of the explosions that shake the valley.

The mining is illegal now, outlawed years ago in a Shimla court hundreds of miles away by civil servants who sought environmental protection. This ruling came after most of the Gaddi men had given up their herds, and the mines had ruined their pastures. Besides, there is still demand for slate from all the city dwellers who are building homes in the lower foothills, escaping the heat and smog of the plains. So the men keep returning, seeking a blessing from Saloti Mata, the goddess of slate, to protect them from government closure as well as the frequent landslides that can bury a man whole.

After you cross the slate mountains, the sun's glare disappears, and you enter a canopy of rhododendron trees, which, before the monsoon, paint the hill a deep cerise. Their flowers can be collected and ground with coriander and salt to make a delicious chutney, but if left to rot, they make the path slick with pink mucus that can prove as dangerous as the slates to the unseasoned traveler. Shankar was rhythmic as he climbed these hills—years of herding sheep and goats up and down the mountain were present in his gait. Now he must walk more slowly, shepherding only hikers and day-trippers. Walking beside him, I became aware of the pressure I put on my thighs to haul myself up the mountain, jolting and forcing my form. His thin frame was erect despite his heavy pack. Shankar wore Decathlon hiking boots like his clients, but most Gaddis climb the mountain in plastic shoes, loafers bought for a hundred rupees in the market. Shankar told me these were the most comfortable choice.

Whenever we walked these trails, up toward his family's shepherding hut, Shankar pointed out places where he had experienced uncanny encounters with ghosts, witches, and Nepali gangs searching for medicinal plants. The thick canopy was home to the Jungle Raja, an incubus who comes to women in their sleep, luring them into illicit sexual forays. It also provided cover for *churel*, the ghosts of infertile women or those who die in childbirth. They appear to exhausted shepherds or miners as beautiful maidens, tempting them, before revealing themselves as old hags with sagging breasts and pockmarked skin, sucking what is left of their victim's vitality. This forest is also the site of a great war in August each year, on one night during the monsoon rains. On this night all the witches in the area congregate and channel their black magic by lifting their dresses and taunting the gods. The Indra Nag, a manifestation of Lord Shiva, meets them in battle. If the witches win, there will be no rain, and famine and misfortune will plague the Gaddis for the following year. If the Indra Nag wins and the witches are defeated, rain will pelt down in the following days and for weeks to come, and a year of abundance and fortune will ensue.[1]

These dark forces are unknown to the foreigners who come seeking shelter in these hills. Instead, Kangra has been a site of conflict and relief for invading

armies, weary pilgrims, and exiled governments for centuries. It has hosted Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist rulers, soldiers, monks, and courtesans over the past five hundred years. This history is rich, complex, and violent: The Islamic Mughal ruler Akbar captured the region in the 1566, before the Sikh king Jai Singh took it back and gave it to the Hindu Rajput king Sansar Chand in 1785. It was the site of conflict between the Gurkhas and Sikhs through the latter part of the eighteenth century, before being recaptured by Ranjit Singh in 1809. Singh granted the Rajput Katoch kings feudal lordship, and they built a thriving courtly culture that patronized artists and pastoralists alike until the First Anglo-Sikh War of 1846. Quelling a series of revolts, the East India Company annexed Punjab and brought Kangra under the rule of the British administration in Lahore.

The "wild and picturesque scenery" of the Dhaula Dhar—the Himalayan mountain range in which Dharamsala is nestled—formed a subsidiary military cantonment for British troops stationed at Kangra and was first occupied by a "Native regiment" that was being raised in the area. They established residences on a "plot of waste land, upon which stood an old Hindu resthouse or *dharamsala*, whence the name adopted for the new cantonment."[2] From the annexation of Punjab in 1849 until the catastrophic earthquake of 1905, European houses and officers' barracks were established along the steep paths of the hillside—first to house British and "Native" military families, the Sixty-Sixth Gurkha Light Infantry, and then an increasing population of civilians who were attracted to the "pine-clad mountain side," the "luxuriant Kangra valley . . . [a] picture of rural quiet," and the burgeoning trading post that supplied goods to the "European residents, officials and their servants."[3] The hill station became a ghost town following the earthquake that destroyed the majority of buildings in the upper cantonment. It left only the Anglican church—St. John in the Wilderness—which hosted a monument to James Bruce, Eighth Earl of Elgin and viceroy of India, who had died there in 1863.

After Indian independence in 1947, Kangra and Dharamsala remained part of the now-divided province of Punjab and hosted large national military cantonments on the lower Dhaula Dhar slopes. After the Fourteenth Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru offered the upper hill settlements of McLeod Ganj to the Dalai Lama's exiled government. This led to the resettlement of more than fifteen thousand Tibetan refugees and the construction of Tsuglagkhang—the Dalai Lama's main temple in McLeod Ganj—and a number of monasteries, Tibetan medical hospitals, libraries, and schools in the surrounding hills. The teachings of the Dalai Lama have attracted a flow of international visitors and devotees since the 1960s. Many of those who came

some three or four decades ago—to learn yoga and meditation, *thangka* painting, and tai chi—have never left. Instead, they bought plots of cheap agricultural land on which they built vast homes, social development organizations, and therapeutic practices. Their houses have hosted salons for Indian and European intellectuals, folklorists, architects, philosophers, and writers.[4]

Today a new kind of digital nomad is drawn to the vistas, the Himalayan marijuana, and small bars along the trail. Some come for a visit, journaling and sipping tea in any one of the vegan cafés, before they move on to Rishikesh or Manali. Others stay longer—renting a room in one of the guesthouses. Many escapees became my companions along my journey—an octogenarian psychoanalyst practicing from a mud house in the village, a designer who was setting up a forest school, two software engineers who devoted themselves to building accessible technologies for the village children. I suppose I was one such person, though I came to follow distress rather than seek relief from it along the mountain trails.

FOR THE GADDI PEOPLE, the imagined potencies of cosmopolitan Dharamsala pale in comparison to the majestic deities that are said to have inhabited this place for much longer. As for many Himalayan residents from Uttarakhand to Arunachal Pradesh, many Gaddis do not think of the Dhaula Dhar as a series of peaks but rather as a divine plateau marked by a set of passes. They call it Dev Bhumi—the land of the gods, or literally "god earth," a place the divine inhabit in peace without the disturbance of humans.[5] It is there, on the snowcapped plateau, that Lord Shiva resides, grieving for his beloved consort Parvati. Shankar told me this great love story during one of our trips up to the shepherding hut. We sat around the hearth, picking at corncobs blackened on the coals. "Gorji," Shankar began, using Parvati's Gaddi name, "always worshipped Dhundu [Lord Shiva], even when he was a sadhu [ascetic]."

> She would go to his cave, clean it, and bring him fruit. But when she saw how dark [skinned] he was, she decided she didn't want to marry him. Dhundu came out of meditation and decided that he wanted to marry Gorji. He went to her [mother's brother] house (Himraj, the ruler of snow) and asked their family, "What gift do you want to marry me?" She said, "I don't want anything for my house, not utensils. I don't want sheep and goats for they will just be killed by leopards." He asked again. She told him that it was snow that she wanted, because a draft of snow would stop Dhundu from coming to take her back to his house and marrying

her. When it was time for the *baraat* [marital procession], the whole sky was filled with stars. She woke in the night and saw the snow starting to fall. She was very happy.

By the morning, everything was covered in snow. Shiva was on the other side of the mountain, waiting to go and pick up his bride. He was very worried. How would he go? He knew he had to unblock the road. He ordered elephants, then horses, to clear the route. But they could not pass. So he fashioned a Gaddi man and his herd from the snow. It was only this first Gaddi man who could clear the route. They were able to cross the passes. Gorji, back in her uncle's house, heard the instruments of the *baraat* playing. At last, Dhundu and his consort reached her house. Her friends called her, saying that her beloved Dhundu was in a bad way. She saw him, and still saw that he was ugly. She was very upset, but the marriage went ahead. As they began to walk around the fire, Dhundu transformed into his most beautiful form. But before the marriage ritual could end, Dhundu ran away. Gorji, now enchanted, followed him up Mount Kailash.

Gorji couldn't find Dhundu. She was so hurt that she took her own life. When Dhundu saw her body, he was wracked by grief and anger. He began to dance with her body in his arms. The gravity of his dance caused the destruction of all that was. From under his feet, the Himalayas were born, and Gorji's body began to split into twelve parts. The pieces of her body fell across the land. Five of those parts fell in the Himalayan region, two in Kangra.

It is Dhundu's frantic dance, and the creative energy that emanated from Gorji's body, that is the animating principle of life and of time. Like Hindus across India, Gaddis also used Gorji's other name, Shakti, in this telling, and more generally to refer to an energizing principle without which there would be no motion.[6] According to elderly men and women, the Gaddis used to be the keepers of this place, the protectors of the mountains, of this life force, through their custodianship of the land. It was only a Gaddi who could clear the route for this mighty deity, who could facilitate this great and tempestuous love. It is through communion with land and with animals that they filled their own bodies with such vitality. But now only a few gnarled persons look back toward the passes. To others, being a custodian of Dev Bhumi means something very different. These others look the other way, toward the plains, toward a new threat that blocks this life force.

* * *

"*Tension* rolled in from the plains," Shankar's sister Anushka told me one day, as we sat overlooking the valley.

ONCE, FROM THAT VANTAGE point, you could expect to see right down to the military cantonment of Pathankot, some four hours' drive away. Now these clear days came only in a slice of October, when the September rains had washed away a year's worth of pollution, and before the Diwali firecrackers broke the sky. Of all districts in the Himachali hills, *tension* hit these villages on the Dhaula Dhar's southern foothills first, according to Anushka, for this was a fault line. Above these villages, the majesty of the mountains; below, the scourge of the plains. Indeed, many Gaddi people saw themselves as straddling this fault line. In their fields one could find both mango and fir trees. They enjoyed the rich meat of goats who fed on mountain herbs, and rice grown in the engorged paddies in the lowlands.

Living on this fault line is not new, for the Gaddi people had made their looping grazing route—from the high pastures of the Dhaula Dhar in their homeland of Chamba to the hot plains of Punjab—for centuries. However, in the past century they have experienced a rapid shift in livelihood, from agropastoralism to military or government service, or to waged work in the slate, tourism, hydropower, and construction sectors. The enclosure of land, increasing urbanization, and the creep of noxious lantana weeds into grazing pastures has made shepherding unfeasible. The sweaty hardship of a nomadic life is less appealing to young men, and no one wants to marry a shepherd.

This shift in livelihood has altered the intimate life of this community and their relations of care. The Gaddi house, formerly crafted from mud and dung, is now made of cold concrete. It is inhabited by a nuclear family and populated with new and modern appliances that elderly Gaddis don't know how to use. An educated bride is now desirable and is expected to channel her literacy into the future trajectories of her children, who are hopefully educated in the local private school and sent to Delhi or Chandigarh or Dubai after matriculation. Where grandmothers are one of thirteen children, mothers are one of four or five, and daughters want only one or two. A woman and her husband supposedly treat their son and their daughter equally, yet girl children are increasingly aborted, and young women are surveilled even more acutely than in the past as they step beyond the bounds of the house to attend school, college, or their job in a nongovernmental organization (NGO).

New forms of inequality in income, education, and status have deepened within and between Gaddi households. Where one brother is in the military,

another runs a small corner shop. Where one neighbor sells his land to a hotelier, another remains a petty laborer on its construction site. These inequalities sometimes run along the existing social divides of caste but sometimes depart from them, allowing lower-caste Gaddis to aspire to higher-class status, and leaving higher-caste Gaddis struggling to maintain their prestige. The result is a fractured social hierarchy and a deeply unstable sense of tribal belonging.

Gaddiness itself has become, or perhaps always was, a fraught social identity—one that shifts in content and form depending on who is watching. The category of Gaddi came into being as a fixed and coherent identifier only through the classificatory gaze of anthropologist-administrators, like Cambridge anthropologist John Henry Hutton, in the 1931 census of India.[7] Without consistent criteria for the definition of a tribe (*jana*), tribalness came to be characterized by the practice of traditional religion or animism, and distinctively egalitarian ways of life that sat outside the hierarchical caste (*jati*) system.[8] In the gaze of the postcolonial state since 1947, this tribalness has taken on new meaning, signifying "backwardness" that warrants material uplift but retains social distinction. At the time, such Scheduled Tribe (ST) status was awarded only to Gaddis whose registered residence was over the other side of the Dhaula Dhar in Chamba. Kangra Gaddis resided in the state of Punjab, a place where it was thought that no backward people or tribes existed. From the formation of the state of Himachal Pradesh in 1966, upper-caste Gaddis have campaigned for ST status based on their landownership and kinship links to Gaddis in Chamba and their distinctive agropastoralist way of life—a status they were granted only in 2002. However, not all Gaddi-speaking people are recognized as ST—lower-caste Gaddis are recognized as Scheduled Caste (SC), and Gaddi-speaking Bhat Brahmins are classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC).[9] For ST Gaddis, such state recognition has come at the very moment when the distinctive Gaddi agropastoral way of life is less evident and when Gaddis of all castes are at pains to resignify their "backward" cultural practices against a newly muscular Hindu nation.[10] Shifts in economic prosperity mean that the door has swung open for Gaddi-speaking people whose families have never practiced shepherding to make claims to Gaddi respectability through the adoption of aesthetic practices—ways of dressing, dancing, worshipping, eating, drinking, and being intimate.[11]

It is in view of this wider aesthetic politics of respectability that people speak of the present as better than the past. The Gaddi people are no longer stigmatized as primitive or savage by neighboring communities or the

state; they are wealthier, life is easier, and people are educated. "Life is better today," most Gaddi people told me. There is much less hard work to do, people are no longer poor (*garib*). "Women are "coming up," and "maximum" (most) people don't believe in caste anymore."[12] As Pinky Hota observes of tribal people across India, such material uplift is entwined with religious pedagogy in the present nationalist atmosphere.[13] Tribal people in the colonial state figured as exoticized, primitive Others. Postindependence affirmative action policies positioned them as backward subjects of development and as animists with a psychological disposition that involved "unalloyed satisfaction in the pleasures of the senses."[14] In both cases, tribes, as Virginius Xaxa writes, were racially and thus biopsychologically distinct—defined precisely by the fact that they were not "contaminated by Hindu civilization" and were said to "belong to either Negroid, Australoid, or Mongoloid stock, with nomadic habits and a love of dance and music."[15] In the present, the Gaddis, like other ST groups, seek a way out of the double bind that is posed by tribal recognition—that one could be recognized as tribal only if one admitted one's racial difference, one's savagery or backwardness. They seek a way of being distinctive and authentic, without being locked into a savage slot, excluded from either modernity or futurity. They are at pains to present themselves as respectable, autochthonous Hindus—distinct from both their proximate Tibetan, Gurkha, and even Central Indian migrant neighbors and the chimeric Muslim Other.[16]

In this time of progress, or perhaps issuing from it, a darker force had also raised its head. "People are following dark things these days" was a refrain I heard frequently. "People these days are terrified; there is more fear now than there has ever been." It is precisely in this moment of perceived prosperity that the forces of witchcraft, black magic, illness, and *tension* have risen. Indeed, modern time itself seemed to be signaled in the eyes of Gaddi people by the advent of *tension*. The condition evokes the loss of tradition, the depletion of the land, the loss of connection to animals, the breakdown of social relations. To some extent, this fraught present is attributed to the epoch of *kali yug*—the fourth and final stage of an endlessly repeated cycle of epochs, characterized by intensifying moral decay.[17] But deeper investigation revealed more proximate causes—in ruptured relationships, intergenerational conflict, economic insecurity, and ecological destruction. The rise of *tension* might be seen as the intimate experience, or perhaps the embodied cost, of this broader project of progress and respectability as it reworks the relations of the self to the other in domestic and neighborly worlds, as well as at broader national scales.

FIGURE 1.2. Mount Kailash, Shiva's seat, and shrine to him at Manimahesh Lake, 13,000 feet. Photograph by Christina Noble, 1983, part of the collection held by Noble and the British Museum.

Following *Tension*

In Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, and even Turkic languages, *tension* is a polysemic term, wielded in different ways to describe the strains and scrapes of life. In the Gaddi community, *tension* is used by people without noticing, an ordinary expression that one heard so often that it lost any particular poignancy. "No *tension*, madam," a taxi driver would reassure me after a near miss on the road. "She gives me so much *tension*," a mother would laugh, of a daughter who spilled the tea she was meant to place before a guest. Yet, as I came to be enfolded into the stresses of life during my fieldwork in the Dhaula Dhar foothills, a more visceral form of *tension* began to emerge.

Gaddi people used *tension* to speak to inherently ambiguous, capricious experiences of disorientation—as Sianne Ngai suggests, "what we might think of as a state of feeling vaguely 'unsettled' or 'confused.'"[18] *Tension* opened a

window into the giddy moments when people aren't sure what to feel about the times they are in, or aren't sure what to feel with respect to intimate others, especially those of different generations. These feelings are different, as Danilyn Rutherford points out, from the prescribed sentiments that issue from social roles. Instead, they inhabit a gap between the social role and the fraught and awkward experience of social life.[19] There are other words in Gaddi dialect for sentiments that have stronger social scripts. The term *bhiog*, for instance, is used to express grief, particularly for a lover or partner; *berry*, to express the anger directed at a lover. *Rog* is used to express physical illness, like the Hindi term *bimar*, and *guttan* to express a feeling of suffocation, similar to that which is symptomatic of panic or anxiety. *Ghum*, borrowed from Urdu, is similar to the Hindi term *dukh*, used to express sorrow or sadness. However, none of these terms captures the same kind of distress or bodily symptoms held in the notion of *tension*, with its precise link to present conditions of uncertainty and aspiration. "There is no word for *tension* in Gaddi," I was told. I encountered *tension* in a whisper through gritted teeth while sitting side by side on a public bus, in an outburst in the privacy of an empty kitchen, or muffled by tears during a domestic altercation. During these encounters the sufferer would raise their head, uttering a familiar refrain, *Mujhe bahut tension hai* (I have so much *tension*). The space became laden with this *tension*. At its nadir, it was a slowly churning melancholy, but as they spoke of their sufferings, it whipped up into a buzzing anxiety. Through these encounters I came to realize that expressions of *tension* were not only speech acts with communicative functions. Instead, articulations of *tension* were fissures in the psychic fabric of the everyday—moments wherein their tellers sought new forms of voice.

Veena Das, in *Life and Words*, draws on the work of Stanley Cavell to distinguish between speech and voice. Reflecting on her own encounters with survivors of the India-Pakistan Partition living in Delhi, Das was struck by the ways in which experiencing violence renders subjects "voiceless—not in the sense that one does not have words—but that these words become frozen, numb, without life."[20] Such voicelessness is a state where one's access to context is lost, meaning that the everyday is rippling with a skepticism that manifests in affects of fear and anticipation. In the Gaddi case, there is no critical traumatic event that infuses the collective experience of the everyday. However, spending time among the Gaddi community, one is struck by the deeply fraught nature of the present—a skepticism that ripples below the surface of the everyday, generating affects of envy, fear, and distress. This comes from a different kind of loss of context, one that issues not from spectacular violence but from a fraying of the social fabrics—relations of caste, class, and tribal belonging—that shape this

community and from an unraveling of the expectations of kinship, conjugality, and gender that undergird them. This is not to say that this context ever existed in any timeless or holistic form but, instead, that fractured relations of care across this community generate painful experiences of distress. Acts of telling *tension* work both to register these fractured care relations in the mind and body and to push back against the structural changes—to livelihood, land, nation, and religion—that drove them. Acts of telling *tension* were scalar moments where people spoke, through their bodies, to the embodied cost of social change.

For Das's sufferers in post-Partition Delhi, finding voice occurred "both within and outside the genres that become available in the descent into the everyday."[21] For the Gaddis, the genres through which these acts of telling occurred were quotidian and multiple. They included ambivalent somatic complaints of aches and pains, humoral imbalances—overheating and cooling, wind and dryness. They also included clipped, grieving, or angry expressions of strain in intimate—conjugal or affinal, neighborly or intergenerational—relations within and around the home. These acts of telling *tension* were charged not only through the language used to make them but also by the shared affects that met in bodies and places in states of atmospheric intensity. *Tension* was not experienced or expressed as an individual pathology.

Importantly, my interlocutors stressed that *tension* did not exist only in their bounded interior worlds, but neither did it exist only exterior to their bodies.[22] Instead, it seemed to emanate from the body; it mingled with the smoke from the fire, making my throat catch and my eyes water. *Tension* was an atmosphere that, as Michael Schnegg puts it, is both an objective ontological entity and an intersubjective experience. Atmospheres originate outside of the box of the psyche, or in between bodies. They are room-filling—soliciting everyone who enters, independent of how they relate to the situation when they enter.[23] To understand *tension*, it was essential to both register this objective entity and become part of it—to pick up on the "fleeting, subtle, and hardly discernible aspects of [people]'s lives," as Tine Gammeltoft writes, that are latent, diffuse, and often gestural or sensorial.[24] Attention to these forms revealed that *tension* settled in some bodies and was seen as contagious from others.[25] *Tension* even rendered the boundary between body and house, house and landscape, porous and permeable. Its onset was unpredictable, sometimes explosive, at other times barely noticeable. Listening to and embodying the various discursive and gestural genres through which *tension* was articulated became my chief mode of ethnographic inquiry.

As my skills for listening for *tension* developed, as I followed *tension* along fractured relations of kinship and care, a larger picture of such shifting inequal-

ities and their affective and embodied registers began to emerge. Critically, *tension* is not evenly distributed across the Gaddi community, nor is it articulated in a singular rigid discursive genre, nor is it manifest in uniform symptoms. Some experience *tension* as a slow wasting of muscles, a seepage of bodily vitality. Others experience *tension* as a fraught and frantic surge of heat in the body, a skyrocketing blood pressure. These intimate and unsettling states open their bodies to the more malign forces—witches, ghosts, and demons—that still inhabit the mountains, inducing states of possession and trance. Some bodies absorb *tension* more than others. People who had roles in the pastoral livelihood that has been devalued experienced *tension* acutely. *Tension* pooled especially along the grooves of fractured intrafamily and intergenerational relations, where expectations of reciprocity, sharing, or respect from intimate others went unmet. People who experienced the direct discrimination or subtle humiliation of caste stigma were more likely to feel *tension*'s effects.

Crucially, women experienced *tension*'s ailments more than men, and women from lower castes and low-income families especially felt its pains. The question of whose body absorbed the *tension* of a family, of who was responsible for domestic distress, was a gendered one. Where men also experienced and expressed *tension*, they were able to displace this distress onto their wives, mothers, and female kin and neighbors—blaming women for causing this *tension* and oftentimes causing them to absorb its effects. Men could also parse tension's effects in more socially acceptable scripts such as alcoholism and could escape its grip through their mobility across the village and even beyond. Men who couldn't contain their *tension* were gendered as feminine. Over time, I came to realize that *tension* was an instrument of patriarchy—it generated gendered bodies by associating them with the feminine and associated devalued qualities of weakness, tempestuousness, and volatility. For this reason, I came to focus—as I do in this book—on women's stories of *tension*, finding within them both the conditions that oppressed sufferers and the means by which they pushed back against them.

Gaddi people also insist that the Western medicine that came with urban development is of no use to those experiencing *tension*. Neither are the plethora of alternative remedial practices found in the homeopathic hospitals and Tibetan medical clinics that have mushroomed across the valley. *Tension* is resistant to pills. It ignores biomedical categories of illness. Instead, it is intimately entangled with the invasive weeds that now overrun their pastures, with the clanging construction that fills their neighborhoods, with the frequent family struggles that unsettle their homes. It began to emerge that *tension* constituted an emic theory of distress that is a far cry from the formulations of psychopathology found in biomedicine or ethnopsychiatry.

This book follows this emic theory of distress—the ways in which distress is conceived of, talked about, and distributed across the community; how it is expressed in and through emplaced relationships with human, nonhuman, and more-than-human others. It does this by focusing not on the space of the clinic or the ritual healing shrine—classic sites of ethnographic inquiry in global mental health—but on intimate, domestic spaces and landscapes in which *tension* is experienced, and the relational lines of kinship and care along which *tension* runs. As such, this book is at once an account of the politico-economic and environmental shifts that this community has experienced in the past century, a cartography of care relations, and a multisensory ethnography of the intimate experiences of atmosphere and body. Through these lenses, this book tells the story of *tension* as it rolls in from the plains into the homes and bodies of those who inhabit the foothills of the Indian Himalayas. But it also tells the story of bodies everywhere absorbing the negative consequences of capitalist expansion, political marginalization, and ecological destruction. At its core is a central theoretical question that has implications far beyond this Himalayan world: Can *tension* travel?

Tension in a Global Context

Across the world, experiences of mental and bodily distress seem to plague marginalized and minoritized groups like the Gaddis. These conditions are difficult to define and even harder to treat. Those in the medical and psychological sciences have called this a "global mental health crisis" and sought to gather data on the prevalence of common mental disorders, substance abuse disorders, and severe psychiatric illness across the Global South. They produce mind-boggling statistics. Between 1990 and 2019, the global number of disability-adjusted life years due to mental disorders increased from 80.8 million to 125.3 million.[26] The economic burden associated with this burden of disease is estimated at about USD 5 trillion.[27] The disproportionate impact of such mental distress is clear. People who experience social isolation, poverty, and gendered, caste, or racial discrimination; who live in slums or informal settlements; who have migrated or been forced to flee; who live on the frontiers of climate change or experience natural disaster, are all more likely to experience mental distress. Yet, when it comes to addressing mental distress, efforts have been weak. Countries across the world fail to build effective mental health policies, and those that do consistently miss mental health targets and invest only minute percentages of their gross domestic product (GDP) in health, let alone in mental health. Where efforts have been made to address mental health issues, investment has often been concentrated in the expansion

of digital well-being technologies, communications campaigns, or task-shifting efforts that don't go anywhere near the structural issues that generate distress in the first place. Perhaps such mental distress is not seen as a priority because its shapes and causes are not understood. The biomedical model of illness, which still dominates policymaking and evidence collection, fares poorly when applied to the complex clinical realities of distress and its florid and dynamic manifestations. Or maybe, more cynically, it is not really in any government's interest to address the drivers of distress, for the expansion of global capital is dependent on the ecological destruction, class inequality, and racial hierarchies of value that are the true causes of distress.

This book enters conversations in global mental health from an intensely local experience in the Gaddi villages of the Indian Himalayas. However, the kind of economic, social, and environmental change that the Gaddi community has experienced is not unfamiliar. Nor is the experience of *tension* unique to the Gaddis. Across India, stories of *tension* are not necessarily stories of poverty, scarcity, survival. The anthropological record has begun to chart the persistent somatic and mental complaints that have emerged during India's economic liberalization. As Lesley Jo Weaver writes, people express *tension* as the undercurrent of strain that comes with modern life in the present, and the uncertainty of reproducing status gains into the future.[28] For men, it manifests the difficulty of providing for their family.[29] For women, it manifests the struggle to maintain strained marriages and domestic care burdens.[30] As Weaver so skillfully notes in an urban Delhi context, the distinctive quality of *tension* is its very flexibility—the wide range of worries and concerns it can describe. While there is a word for "tension" in Hindi (*tanav*), it is rarely used, indicating the idiomatic specificity and theoretical potential of the term itself. She notes that for her urban middle-class interlocutors, *tension* stemmed primarily from modern pursuits like going to movie theaters, eating in restaurants, driving in traffic, and waiting in long lines and signaled the deterioration of the social fabric that issued from such pursuits.[31]

As for Weaver's interlocutors, *tension* for the Gaddis emerged from this thick web of status concerns—the aspirational, speculative concerns of accumulation amid the growing inequality of a cash economy. Bodies with *tension* are not scrawny or hungry; they are not riddled with the diseases of the poor (tuberculosis, polio, leprosy) nor with the diseases of the city (cholera, diphtheria, hepatitis). Instead, these bodies are fattened on diets of rice and junk food and suffer sedentary sicknesses like high blood pressure or diabetes. These minds are more concerned with how to manage house extensions, land deals, loan repayments for scooters or white goods, new business ventures, lost job

contracts, good marriage matches, school fee payments, or college enrollments. *Tension* is about managing these worldly concerns as part of the struggle to maintain a footing on the precarious lower rungs of the Indian middle class. It is in this sense that the Gaddi case parallels the experience of many marginalized groups across India, and indeed across the global majority, who dwell on the frontiers of capital expansion. But existing accounts tell the story of *tension* and similar conditions from the urban slum, or busy city hospital, that is so often the setting for tales of contemporary psychosomatic distress. A far more unsettling story remains to be told of *tension* at the margins, in a place that is yet to undergo the full set of transformations that have swept through urban areas, in a place where concerns of ecological destruction frame experiences of social mobility.

THE HIMALAYAS ARE ONE such place. The Western Himalayan region has undergone rapid development since Indian economic liberalization in 1991. Deep tunnels have been carved through the heart of the mountains. Roads have been built to reach the most far-flung villages. Farms have transformed into towering hotels. The local people have been the strongest advocates for this campaign—constructing hydropower dams and hotels, shepherding tourists rather than goats through the foothills—as they aspire for inclusion in a liberalizing India. This region has also, however, been at the frontier of climate disaster. The communities of the Western Himalayas have watched as the glaciers above them melt, swelling rivers and causing catastrophic thunderstorms and floods. They have attempted to shield their animals and crops from erratic weather conditions and the blight they bring. They have accepted their previously pure water sources becoming polluted with plastic packets and the toxic waste that spills over from construction sites.

Yet, at the same time, the ecology and geography of the region have become sacralized in new ways. On one hand, the Dev Bhumi has taken on new meaning as the frontier of sacred Hindu territory. As Radhika Govindrajan writes of neighboring Uttarakhand, "The state and business investors have fuelled the explosive rise of a *dharmic* (religious) industry—a network of gurus, ashrams, yoga and wellness retreats, and temples—that claims to draw its own potency from the *shakti* (creative power) of the *Devbhumi*."[32] Claims to this land are entwined in new ways with both processes of speculative accumulation and retellings of religious history.[33] On the other hand, the intensification of thermal landscapes in the plains—including skyrocketing temperatures and toxic pollution—make the pure air of the Himalayas even

FIGURE 1.3. Men work in the slate mines at the foothill of the Dhaula Dhar. Photograph by Soujanyaa Boruah, 2024.

more desirable to tourist and settler alike. Protectionist measures introduced by the state, like the enclosure of land in nature parks and closure of extractive industries like slate mining, render the landscape both the perfect victim of and the perfect solution to ecological destruction and climate disaster. The Gaddis sit in an awkward position in relation to both senses of sacred geography such that what it means to be a custodian of, or "indigenous" to, this land is in question.

The Himalayan context provides a microcosm for the study of ecological distress because the loss of majestic natural beauty that has come with development and climate change is so acute. However, it is not hard to see how this complex story might also be told for marginal groups across India's Sundarbans mangroves, Tamilian forests, or Goan coastlines. It is not hard to see how it might resonate with peoples who have experienced dispossession in Australia, the Amazon, or the Gran Chaco. The links to livelihood loss in the West Papuan jungle, the Scottish Munros, or the Tibetan Plateau might comparatively be drawn.[34] This book watches as people who held vital bonds to land and livelihood experience ambivalent affects toward the rapid change that is characteristic of the fraught present. And yet the Gaddi case offers

a unique contribution to emergent conversations surrounding ecological distress, for Gaddi claims to autochthony do not mesh well with either the global discourses of Indigenous self-determination or Indian Adivasi political struggles.[35] Indeed, the Gaddi case reveals the purity politics and perversions of scale at play in the theorization of ecological distress.

On one level, this book is an account of a specific form of distress that Gaddi tribal people living in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas experience in the context of an increasingly fraught present. These people—across gender, generational, caste, class, and tribal divides—experience this present differently, expressing specific forms of *tension*. But as you read their stories—of complicated family dynamics, burdens of housework and care, aspirations for middle-class mobility, experiences of miscarriage or marital abuse—you might see yourself, your brother, your wife, or your grandmother, as I saw mine. You might feel your own head pulsing, or a sharpness at the point where your neck becomes your shoulders. On another level, therefore, this book is about how bodies and relations elsewhere hold distress. It offers *tension* as an emic theory of distress, but it also asks critically: Can *tension* travel?

Tension's Travels

Today, in English dictionaries, *tension* is defined as a feeling of worry and stress that makes it impossible to relax. But it also has a relational meaning—"a situation in which people do not trust each other, or feel unfriendly towards each other, and that may cause them to attack each other." And it has a physical meaning—"the state of being stretched tight; the extent to which something is stretched tight."[36] In each of these meanings, we see a state or condition, a bounded temporal and spatial pause, a moment between relaxation and snapping, an impasse. When people use the word *tension*, these meanings are often read into each other. The body in a state of anxiety feels its muscles constrict and stretch tight, inducing changes in blood pressure, hormones, breath, and bowels.[37] The relational state of distrust, suspicion, and jealousy is felt in the ruminating mind, in the inability to relax. The physical state of strain between structural forces, opposing tendencies pulling a rope taut, is experienced as pressure points inducing relational and bodily strain, threatening the system, a prelude to snapping. When people talk about tension, they might be referring to any one or all of these levels at the same time. Their meaning might not be wholly negative—for all systems and relations require some form of tension to move, operate, or grow.

The etymology of *tension* involves a journey across epochs of medical and social thought. Following this journey reveals that tension has always acted as a prism for gendered, racialized and classed notions of the body—used as a morally charged and biologically encoded means of differentiating or stabilizing forms of social stratification. The term can be traced to the Latin *tens* (to stretch). Its first uses are noted in sixteenth-century France, as a medical term denoting a condition of being stretched or strained. It grew in usage over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and came to be associated with the "nerves," as a kind of nervous strain. Tension was used by the French medical nosologist Boissier de Sauvages in 1772 to describe a condition of bodily pain and social withdrawal caused by *panophobia phrontis*, also called *worry*.[38] Herein, the term was nested in the idea of the "Body as Machine"—wherein Protestant concerns of productivity converged with a doctrine of materialism that, as the cultural psychiatrist Sushrut Jadhav puts it, saw "the Body [as] a source of energy capable of transforming universal natural energy into mechanical work."[39] As Jadhav recounts, drawing on foundational historical material compiled by Anson Rabinbach, the "Body as Machine" thesis was popularized by the French physician and philosopher, who saw the body as analogous to a "watch-spring with unique self-winding qualities."[40] Within this model, tension is a hydraulic quality that both permits and prevents motion. When it does the latter, it becomes associated with fatigue, the antithesis of productivity.

In the twentieth century, physicians became interested in measuring and defining different states of such fatigue. One of the most notable of these figures was the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, who sought to plot out different types of fatigue through experiments on factory workers in his laboratory. Kraepelin's experiments dovetailed with the works of psychiatrists like George Miller Beard, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Charles Féré, who sought to pinpoint the forms of fatigue that issued from nervous states coming from the brain and spinal cord.[41] In his 1909 psychiatric treatise, Kraepelin defined tension as one such state, describing the association of inner tension with anhedonia—or the inability to feel pleasure—that permeates both the body and the mind. Such a description of tension as a nervous condition of impaired energy echoes Marxist notions of alienation produced by the reduction of the body to a machine in the capitalist system. Capitalism, Karl Marx writes, "squanders human lives . . . and not only blood and flesh, but also nerve and brain."[42] However, most physicians of the time framed tension not as a condition of labor but as one of race—a hereditary condition that affected groups who were considered resistant to work.[43] The most prominent theorist of such racialized,

social Darwinist notions of tension was the French psychologist and physician Pierre Janet. Janet, as recounted by Rabinbach, postulated a theory of psychological tension that involved a hierarchy of energies required for different types of activities.[44] In his model, emotions were a "variety" of fatigue in the context of a psyche that was constantly struggling between the economies of energy and fatigue.

The "Body as Machine," and its notions of fatigue, exhaustion, and nervous tension, also had influence over physicians in India, who came to modernist, industrial notions of embodiment under the yoke of British colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[45] The British colonial project worked through the diffusion of regimes of embodiment that instituted hierarchies of race, substance, and sentiment. This was not a straightforward process of hegemonic dominance, as the historian David Arnold shows, but an ongoing epistemic struggle between pluralistic regimes.[46] One such epistemic struggle is articulated in the writings of David Chowry Muthu—a London-trained tuberculosis specialist who, as Bharat Venkat recounts, left his sanatorium practice in England to travel across India. In his writings, we find a vision of the body as machine—"a system of nerves, capable of both vitality and exhaustion."[47] This body is threatened by the unceasing labor of the colonial-industrial complex and the forms of urban life that go with it. The body, mind, and soul are depleted by such conditions, resulting in forms of nervousness that were not a problem of the individual but a product of colonial oppression and extraction that did not suit the embodied constitution of Indian peoples. As Venkat puts it, "What the nervous body exposed was a weakness that threatened to slide into racial degeneracy."[48] Herein we see the racialized regimes of embodiment implicit in theories of tension proposed by French physicians like Janet were overturned by their colleagues in the colonies. For Muthu, the solution to both tuberculosis and nervousness was freedom from confinement by the colonial state. Such examples help us to question whether and how *tension*, as it is used in contemporary India, might be seen as inherently decolonial—in the sense that *tension* is a term taken from colonial psychiatry and resignified in a place that has experienced the hardest edges of colonial governance, extraction, and dispossession and that experiences its most acute ongoing legacies in gender, caste, and tribal inequality and ecological destruction. We begin to feel out the ways in which tension allows us to reflect on power.

Tension has been the impetus for such reflections by another psychiatrist of colonial rule, Frantz Fanon. "The native's muscles are always tensed," Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. "You can't say that he is terrorized, or even apprehensive. He is in fact ready at a moment's notice to exchange the role of

the quarry for that of the hunter. The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor."[49] Fanon uses muscular tension as a central metaphor to articulate how this oppression works through the body and causes distress. Specifically, tension indicates an embodiment of repressed temporality. Fanon writes, "The problem considered here is one of time. Those Negroes and white men will be disalienated who refuse to let themselves be sealed away in the materialized Tower of the Past. For many other Negroes, in other ways, disalienation will come into being through their refusal to accept the present as definitive."[50]

For Fanon, tension is the product of systems of structural oppression that petrify history and seal the present. Psychological healing and liberation exist together in moments when colonized people break with the history that is distorted by colonizers and restore an agentive sense of narrative time.[51] Interpreting Fanon's arguments, the cultural theorist Darieck Scott suggests that muscular tension speaks to both the ways in which racialized bodies hold time as distress and the ways in which they hold the potential for resistance. "The muscles, in contraction or tension, are a metaphor referring to some reservoir of resistance to the colonizer's acts of subjugation and enslavement."[52] For Scott, Fanon's reflections frame tension as a form of "power in the midst of debility" that is held in the body.

Thinking about *tension* alongside decolonial thinkers—or allowing them to "haunt" the writing of distress—helps us to understand that this state of strain, of almost snapping, is political rather than medical.[53] It is biopolitical in the Foucauldian sense that metaphors of bodily disorder are used to control and discipline intimate experience. But it is also political in the psychoanalytic sense that sensuous experiences of bodily disorder, and the bodily scripts used to describe them, are often inchoate sources of resistance—as Mark Nichter first argued in his conception of "idioms of distress."[54] In these instances, the articulation of distress both registers the postcolonial relation and opens the possibility of its refusal.

IRONICALLY, THE ENTRY OF the English term *tension* into twenty-first-century popular Indian parlance is, quite literally, about power. The term gained popularity through electrical voltage warning signs.[55] These signs, ubiquitous to urban infrastructure, warned people of "high-tension" electrical cables that were dangerous if touched. The fluid and porous metaphor of power in the built environment and in the body is repressed or transformed, however, in contemporary psychiatric and psychological uses of the term. In

the psychiatric clinic, tension has come to be associated with an individualizing, mentalist diagnosis of anxiety and with wider psychosomatic conditions such as chronic fatigue disorder and myalgic encephalomyelitis.[56] Within these conditions registered in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition*, the Freudian psychoanalytic cleavage of body from mind prevails—where the origin of bodily symptoms is psychological, and the origin of psychological symptoms can be located in individual traumatic developmental, often libidinal, events.[57] Such Freudian "conversion" models of symptomology, João Biehl and Amy Moran-Thomas note, are both individualizing and universalizing—foreclosing the possibility of the symptom as relational, a necessary condition for an individual to establish new relations to the world or to others.[58]

Both relationality and politics are missing from the psychiatric and psychological literature on tension in South Asia, where *tension* has been used as a synonym for "stress," a biopsychosocial illness that afflicts the individual body or mind.[59] Psychiatrists suggest that *tension* presents itself as a cultural manifestation of psychological symptoms consistent with universal common mental disorders like depression and anxiety, and somatic symptoms such as dizziness, asthma, diarrhea, fever, and nonspecific aches and pains.[60] Contextually, *tension* has been associated with poverty and deprivation, a lack of education, and exposure to violence, particularly intimate partner violence.[61] However, the equation of *tension* with terms such as *stress* or pathologies such as depression or anxiety continues to obscure the way that distress is embedded in and generated through politicized networks of social relations.

This fractious genealogy shows that *tension* has already traveled across space and time. But how far might it travel still? In this book I attempt to restore the relational and political significances of tension, thus recuperating it as an analytic through which to understand the cumulative psychic and embodied costs of social, political, and economic change. I offer ethnography as a way of finding, conceptualizing, and rendering distress, a way that centers wider structural processes that shape psychic and bodily worlds, without allowing such structures to erase the nuanced experiences of those who suffer it. I examine how and why distress is bound to forms of dispossession, inequality, and social change, without reducing such forms to rigid etiologies. I do this by following one community through a set of social, political, and economic changes and tracking how distress is generated in ways that cut through dominant linear narratives of development and progress, on one hand, or moral decline and loss, on the other.

Critically, this book does not argue that *tension* can be explained by or attributed to any medical condition or particular "uniform etiology of neo-

liberalization or post-Fordism," as Bhrigupati Singh puts it.[62] It is not *really* depression or anxiety. It is not caused *only* by climate change. It is not *actually* a way of talking about caste or tribe or gender inequality by other means. *Tension* is all of these things and perhaps, in some cases, none of them. In this book I resist the urge to explain away *tension*, or to try to wrestle its multiple manifestations into neat categories of illness like the "cultural syndrome," or even to chart out a defined communicative purpose as part of a personal symbol or "idiom of distress."[63] Herein, I am sensitive to Arthur Kleinman's warnings about "category fallacy," where nosological categories—generated by psychiatrists or anthropologists—are reified and misleadingly applied to members of other cultures for whom they lack coherence or validity.[64] Instead, I lean into the layered, chameleonic, and ambivalent nature of distress: how people attribute it at different moments to different experiences, how it might appear acutely and then, just as quickly, ebb away. I do this by using the semiotic tools of canonical medical anthropology but deploying them outside of biomedical epistemic structures or culturalist frameworks. I locate *tension* outside of Western naturalist or modernist imaginaries that remain firmly anchored in, and perpetuate, the purification of nature from culture, body from mind. I allow the theories, imaginations, and voices of my Gaddi interlocutors to be taken seriously on their own terms—which may be slippery, unstable, and incoherent and may contain traces of multiple "patchy" ontological or cosmological orientations.[65] If these interpretations of *tension* travel, it is not coherently across bounded culturalist worlds but along unruly currents of public culture. Ethnography is an ideal tool for this kind of examination of distress, for it offers a descriptive encounter with distress in its complex relationality that is not paralleled in the positivism of the social or medical sciences.

I lean in, too, to the political potentialities held in the act of telling tension. This involved an attention to particular politics of scale—capturing the intimate experiences of pain in the everyday and connecting them to wider forms of structural change, without allowing such structural forms to eclipse the indissoluble uniqueness of such pain. As Vanessa Agard-Jones puts it, the body becomes "a site of intra-action from which we might ask new, more finely calibrated questions about how individual bodies . . . come to be, in dynamic relationship to the worlds around them."[66] At one level, this involves describing the shifting sociology of this community—the ways in which changes to political, economic, and environmental worlds were shifting forms of status and group belonging. At another, however, it involves following feminist and antiracist methods of attuning to the lower frequencies of these acts of telling—to, as Tina Campt describes, the reverberations of social life that are "not always perceptible to the human ear."[67]

Such attunement opens me to an understanding of *tension* and its articulations as a form of politics that, as Paul Gilroy notes, is "created under the very nose of the overseers," existing fugitively at "a lower frequency where it is played out, danced, acted, as well as sung and sung about."[68] To encounter *tension* is to encounter the complex choreographies by which people from the Gaddi community navigate the fraught micropolitics of everyday life, as it is cut through by the nexus of caste, class, tribal, and gendered inequalities.

Chapter Outline

This book is not a typology or taxonomy of *tension*; instead, it might be read according to the Rashomon principle. The Rashomon technique is used in screen writing to describe a story structure in which an event is portrayed in different and sometimes contradictory ways by a series of people. It is named after the 1950 Akira Kurosawa film of the same name in which the murder of a samurai and the rape of his wife are recounted from the perspective of multiple individuals who witnessed the event. Despite the proximity of the individuals to the event, their accounts are contradictory such that the film ends without a clear sense of resolution or certainty as to what has occurred. The way in which I structure the chapters in this book might be seen, similarly, as multiple perspectives on the same relationships and events that constitute the fraught present for the Gaddi people. In each chapter I hope to give a different perspective on the same set of relational struggles and social changes, thus revealing how such struggles and changes are experienced differently across this community. Each chapter offers a different generational, gendered, or caste positionality within domestic, kinship, and neighborhood relations. The embodied sensations and affects that people experience in the forthcoming accounts ought not to be read as consistent conditions or illnesses that are only experienced by subgroups of the Gaddi community but as forms of distress that are generated from particular intersectional relational conditions. As such, it is not that all elderly people experience *kamzori* (weakness) and no young people do, for example, but that *kamzori* was used by some elderly women in a particular way to articulate their complaints. As in the film *Rashomon*, this book does not intend to weigh up and side with any given perspective, or to provide a neat resolution as to what, really, *tension* is. Instead, it offers only my own ethnographic attempts to render the accounts that were shared with me.

Chapter 1 examines how Gaddi people express and experience distress relationally. It opens by introducing readers to Uncle Piouche and Aunty Karmini, the wealthy lower-caste landlords with whom I grew close during

my fieldwork. It recounts how I became attuned to the forms of suspicion, envy, and jealousy that were experienced by Uncle and Aunty's family as a result of their upward social mobility, revealing how these affects were expressed through bodily complaints of *opara* (black magic). This case suggests that wider experiences of the present are deeply fraught for Gaddi people—where changes in livelihood, land tenure, and religion have rendered forms of social precedence deeply unstable and issued new forms of inequality that cut through kinship and community relations. It shows how rumors about black magic allow people to register, viscerally, the distress that underpins dominant narratives of progress in this community. However, it also shows that the question of who absorbs distress, and who is presented as its perpetrator, generates and perpetuates inequality.

We then turn to the more proximate forms of *tension*, as they speak primarily to generational divergences in experiences of social, political, economic, and environmental change. My focus in the following chapters is primarily on women's experiences of *tension*, for women absorbed distress far more acutely than men did in Gaddi households. Indeed, distress was an axis of patriarchy. In chapter 2 we meet an elderly Gaddi woman who seemed to be looking backward in time, toward an immemorial period of abundance. In the present she appears anachronistic, as she continues to tend crops and livestock without the support of her children. This state leaves her feeling *kamzori. Kamzori* was experienced in wasting muscles, *low BP*, insomnia, and a general sense of malnourishment and neglect that could not be addressed through biomedical care. It worked to obliquely signify the lack of respect and care older women got from younger generations, and particularly from their daughters-in-law. It was a means by which they held the burden of historical time and sought to keep it present in their households.

Women from a younger generation, in contrast, saw the present as ripe with opportunity, as they aspired toward inclusion on the lower rungs of India's Hindu middle class. But for many, the realities of economic insecurity meant that this kind of mobility was impossible to maintain, and the realities of domestic labor left them depleted. The ripe present became looping and fraught. They expressed this heightened present through *ghar ki tension* and its bodily symptoms of *high BP*, heart palpitations, and anxiety—the subject of chapter 3.

Their daughters, or Gaddi youth, sought a different kind of future. Gaddi young women sought education and employment in the cities, and marriage matches that would allow them freedom of movement and thought. However, they were also heavily surveilled by their kin, lest they overstep the careful

boundaries of respectability and sexual propriety. Chapter 4 shows how young women experienced an impasse between the constraining responsibilities of the household and the expansive but diffuse opportunities of employment and education. They expressed this impasse as *future tension*—in headaches, leaking vaginal fluid, pain in their bowels, and sometimes episodes of disassociation.

The final chapter turns to the forms of distress that women experience as time is shattered or fragmented. Women who were seen as not able to manage their *tension*, who were not able to maintain norms of propriety or respectability, were labeled as *pagal* (mad). In episodes of madness, women became estranged from time and from their bodies, afflicted by acute and malign spirit possession, or involved in erratic sexual behavior. This chapter finds, within experiences of madness, forms of agency against the odds.

The conclusion of this book returns to the question, Can *tension* travel? It sketches out a vision for the anthropology of mental health that involves a commitment to charting illness and distress against the violence of abstraction. It shows how *tension* gives us the tools to unyoke a number of modernist distinctions that plague the Western psy-sciences—between the inside and the outside of the body but also between the psyche and the soma and, even more fundamentally, between the individual with desires and drives and the external social forces or even kinship relations that stand outside of them. It also shows how *tension* gives us the tools to undo formulaic stories of politico-economic or environmental transformation through a more careful attention to the ways in which people scale between their bodies and broader structural forces. As such, it shows how *tension* speaks back to biomedical models of mental illness and refines politico-economic models of social change.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. For a full account of this ritual, see Phillimore, "Marriage and Social Organisation," 308–9.

2. Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer*, 301–2.

3. Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer*, 301–2.

4. See Narayan, *Mondays*.

5. See Govindrajan, "Labors of Love," 199.

6. Wadley, *Shakti*.

7. Kapila, "Measure of a Tribe."

8. Xaxa, *State, Society and Tribes*, 1–2.

9. Kapila, "Measure of a Tribe"; Christopher, "'Scheduled Tribe Dalit.'" As Kriti Kapila suggests, the watershed was the Mandal Commission's recommendations in the 1990s that positive discrimination should be extended not only to the ritually and/or "civilizationally" deprived sections of India but also to what were termed "economically backward classes." Gaddi Rajputs, Thakurs, and Ranas were adamant that they would not be classified as Other Backward Classes but sought recognition as ST for their distinctive way of life.

10. Kapila, "Measure of a Tribe."

11. See Tilche, *Adivasi Art*; and Simpson, "Aesthetic Politics."

12. I use the term *lower-caste* as opposed to *dalit* as the latter term was not widely used during my time of fieldwork.

13. Hota, *Violence of Recognition*, 4.

14. Xaxa, *State, Society and Tribes*, 15.

15. Xaxa, *State, Society and Tribes*, 3.

16. This project of respectability is only partly attributable to Hindu nationalist ideology. Unlike neighboring Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh is predominantly Hindu but does not have a deep history of Hindutva grassroots activism, and Gaddi people support both the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian Congress Party (ICP).

17. Pinney, "Living in the Kal(i)yug."

18. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 14.

19. Rutherford, "Affect Theory."

20. V. Das, *Life and Words*, 8.

21. V. Das, *Life and Words*, 216.

22. See Martin, *Psychotherapy, Anthropology*, for an in-depth analysis of interiority and exteriority in psychology.

23. Schnegg, "Collective Loneliness." Schnegg draws on the work of phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz and feminist theorist Sarah Ahmed.

24. Gammeltoft, "Domestic Moods," 10.

25. B. Singh and Sharan, "Contagion." Herein *tension* is akin to the *asrat* in some instances that Bhrigupati Singh and Pratap Sharan write of; see chapter 5.

26. GD Mental Disorders Collaborators, "Burden."

27. Arias et al., "Quantifying Global Burden."

28. Qureshi, *Chronic Illness*, 123; J. Das et al., "Mental Health Gender-Gap"; Weaver, "Tension Among Women"; Weaver, *Sugar and Tension*. Anthropologists and community psychologists have begun to draw out the relational meanings of *tension*, seeing it as the embodied and psychologically internalized stress of supporting kin in conditions of scarcity. *Tension* is seen as serving a communicative purpose, expressing dissatisfaction with life and difficulties in fulfilling social roles, and allowing the sufferer to seek outside help. Yet none of these studies, except for Weaver's ("Tension Among Women"; *Sugar and Tension*), look at *tension* on its own terms, instead seeing it alongside a range of other chronic illnesses or idioms of distress. Beyond the Indian context, see Wardell, *Living in the Tension*.

29. Ramaswami, "Masculinity"; Halliburton, "'Just Some Spirits.'"

30. V. Das, *Affliction*; Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste*; Atal and Foster, "'Life Is Tension.'"

31. Weaver, "Tension Among Women," 44.

32. Govindrajan, "Labors of Love," 199.

33. While the presence of Hindutva activist organizations in Himachal Pradesh is comparatively less than in neighboring states, Daniela Berti notes the efforts of the Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana (ABISY) in Kangra as focused on resignifying the region's name and history. She writes, "In the district of Kangra, south-east of Himachal Pradesh, the unit's project deals with Trigarta, an ancient name for this area. One ABISY publication entitled Yug-yugin trigarta (Trigarta through the ages) translates Trigarta as 'three valleys' which, as explained in the Foreword, would correspond to a 'distinct socio-cultural and political entity, [whose] history goes back to before Mahabharata.'" Berti, "Local Enactment of Hindutva," 68.

34. See Bessire, *Behold the Black Caiman*; and Chao, *In the Shadow*. I have found it particularly helpful to compare *tension* to the *abu abu* that Sophie Chao recounts as affecting the Marind people of Merauke in West Papua, and the Black Caiman that affects the Ayoreo of the Gran Chaco—where rapid incursions of capitalist development are shaping the psychic and embodied worlds of Indigenous people.

35. Gaddi people do not use either the term *Indigenous* or the term *Adivasi* to describe their claim to custodianship of land. See Eubanks and Sherpa, "We Are," for a deeper discussion of Indigenous social movements in India.

36. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "tension," accessed July 18, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/tension_v.

37. Hydraulic models of blood pressure and *tension* are also described in Cohen, "Anthropology of Senility"; and V. Das, *Affliction*.

38. Crocq, "History of Anxiety."

39. Jadhav, "Western Depression," 278.

40. Rabinbach, *Human Motor*, 51, quoted in Jadhav, "Western Depression."

41. Rabinbach, *Human Motor*, 153.

42. Marx, quoted in Blackledge, *Marxism and Ethics*, 50.

43. Jadhav, "Western Depression."

44. See Jadhav, "Western Depression," 279.

45. Venkat, *Limits of Cure*, 39.

46. Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*; Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable"; Bear, *Lines of the Nation*.

47. Venkat, *Limits of Cure*, 38.

48. Venkat, *Limits of Cure*, 39.

49. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 53.

50. Fanon, quoted in Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 40.

51. Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 48.

52. Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 65.

53. See Delvecchio-Good et al., *Postcolonial Disorders*.

54. Nichter, "Idioms of Distress."

55. Ravi N. Singh, personal communication, November 2024.

56. Jadhav, "Western Depression."

57. Wilson, *Gut Feminism*.

58. Biehl and Moran-Thomas, "Symptoms."

59. Patel and Oomman, "Mental Health Matters Too"; Rodrigues et al., "Listening to Mothers"; Kermode et al., "Empowerment of Women"; Paralikar et al., "Cultural Epidemiology."

60. Patel et al., "Poverty."

61. Shidhaye and Patel, "Socio-Economic, Gender and Health Factors"; T. Roberts et al., "Is There a Medicine?"

62. B. Singh, "Can a Neighborhood Fall Sick?"

63. The "cultural syndrome" approach was developed by Byron Good, looking at heart distress in Iran. A cultural syndrome indicates "typical experiences, a set of words, experiences and feelings, which 'run together' for the members of a society." Good, "Heart," 26–27. An idiom of distress is an evolving set of specific words, phrases, and even actions that people use in different cultural contexts to express and respond to distress. Nichter, "Idioms of Distress." See also Nichter, "Idioms of Distress Revisited"; and Kaiser and Weaver, "Culture-Bound Syndromes," for an updated analysis of how to use idioms of distress in ways that take into account interpersonal, structural, and symbolic dynamics.

64. Kleinman, "Anthropology and Psychiatry," 452.

65. Tsing et al., "Patchy Anthropocene."

66. Agard-Jones, "Bodies," 192.

67. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 26, 54. Campt uses the example of passport photographs of Ugandan migrants to Birmingham. She encourages us to pay attention to

"these sublimely quiet images" as they "enunciate an aspirational politics that are accessible at the lowest of frequencies" (26).

68. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 37.

1. *OPARA*

Some of the ethnographic accounts and analysis in this chapter also appear in Nikita Simpson, "Encountering the Dain," *HIMALAYA: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 42, no. 2 (2023): 70–85.

1. Bear, "Doubt, Conflict, Mediation," 9.

2. See Cooper et al., "Back/s to the Present."

3. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.

4. Xaxa, *State, Society and Tribes*, 14.

5. Kapila, "Governing Morals."

6. See Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

7. Kapila, "Governing Morals," 19.

8. Christopher and Phillimore, "Exploring Gaddi Pluralities," 7.

9. Christopher and Phillimore, "Exploring Gaddi Pluralities," 7.

10. Lyall, *Report*, 32, 47–48. Lyall writes, "The right to collect the grazing fees paid by Gaddi shepherds was at first transferred to the communities, but the shepherds at once objected, and showed that the measure would injure them, as the boundaries of their runs did not coincide with the boundaries of the mauzalis; so Mr. Barnes, with the sanction of the Chief Commissioner, annulled the transfer. The same objection did not apply in the case of, the dues or rent hitherto paid to the State by other persons, such as the Giijar herdsmen, the quarriers, iron-smelters, netters of falcons, owners of water-mill" (xii).

11. Lyall, *Report*, 46.

12. In relation to religion, Gaddis were recorded in the census of 1901 as of the same pastoralist group as Muslim Gadis of Karnal and Delhi. This was corrected in 1911, when the two groups were separated on religious grounds—where the Gaddis of the hills were noted for their Hindu beliefs, as opposed to the Muslim Gadis of the plains. The Gaddis were also distinguished from Muslim Gujjar buffalo herders who inhabit the hills and, often, the same pastures. For analysis of Gaddi-Gujjar relations from colonial times to the present, see Kapila, "Governing Morals," 48; and Axelby, "'Who Has the Stick.'"

13. Barnes, *Report*, 154–55.

14. Skaria, "Shades of Wildness"; Skaria, "Women, Witchcraft."

15. Rose, *Tribes and Castes*, iii.

16. Rose, *Tribes and Castes*, i.

17. Xaxa, *State, Society and Tribes*, 15.

18. Kapila, "Governing Morals," 72.

19. Sharabi, "Politics of Madness," 186.

20. Pinney, "Living in the Kal(i)yug," 78.

21. In November 2016 the Indian national government announced that they would render all five hundred– and thousand-rupee notes obsolete and issue new notes. This