

SHSS 2023 School Talks



Prof. Sudha Vasan

Title of the Talk: Development, Devta and Deodar: Socio-Ecological Transformations in the Western Himalayas

Brief Bio: Prof. Sudha Vasan teaches and writes on political ecology with a focus on issues of class, gender, caste, and adivasi issues as they intersect with ecology and environmentalism. She has a regional interest in the Himalayas, and has published widely on state-society relations, cross-border trade, sacred nature, forest law, policy and institutions. Her book *Living with Diversity: Forestry Institutions in the Western Himalaya* was published in 2007 by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. She has held research and teaching positions at Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (USA) from where she completed her Ph.D., Institute of Economic Growth (Delhi), Indian Institute of Advanced Study (Shimla) and Indian Institute of Technology (Bombay). She is currently Professor and Head at the Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, India.

Abstract for the Talk:

Development, Devta and Deodar: Socio-Ecological Transformations in the Western Himalayas: The relationship of mountain communities with local ecosystems have radically transformed in the last two decades in the Western Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh. Unlike agrarian transition in some other regions, social change in HP is occurring in the context of rising social development indicators and is anchored on reinvestment of agrarian surplus in intergenerational education and mobility. Based on long term ethnographic research in Kullu valley, I discuss the implications of this transition for ecological governance in this region. Community and socio-ecological relations in this region are built around the devta, a particular socio-religious institution in the region. The institution of the devta enables communities to reimagine themselves in the context of decreasing dependence on rural networks, and wider dispersal of members. While it is also implicated in the social reproduction of caste, it allows multi-local households with occupational diversification to retain their agrarian identities and socio-ecological networks. This defies teleological understanding of social change as a process of urbanization, and dissolution of traditional institutions and place-based rural communities. Households are turning multi-local, migration is circular, and community networks are reconstituted through technological changes such as social media. The gap between place-based communities and cultural communities also influences use of local ecosystems. Forest dependence and energy use has seen qualitative changes not captured by quantitative estimates. I argue for a broader theoretical rethinking on the sociology of rural transformation, urbanization and agrarian transition based on this ethnographic understanding. This also demands a reassessment of fundamental social concepts such as household and community that underpin community-based development and environmental policies in the Western Himalayas.