

# HIMALAYAN ROPE SLIDING AND VILLAGE HINDUISM: AN ANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

ONE of the most spectacular, yet little-known ceremonies in India is rope sliding, performed in the lower Himalayan area and known variously as *bēdā-rat*, *barta*, *badwār*, *barat*. Until I obtained two eye-witness accounts of this ceremony in western Garhwal, I had been unaware of its existence and, in fact, was at first suspicious that my informants were taking advantage of my credulity. I have since located seven brief, apparently independent accounts by nineteenth century observers which show a minimal distribution of the ceremony from Garhwal District to the Sulej valley, i.e. on both sides of the border between Central and Western Pahari-speaking areas.<sup>2</sup> The half-dozen other references that I have found all derive from the accounts of Moorcroft and Trebeck, and of Traill,<sup>3</sup> while some of the best accounts have been overlooked. The ceremony has even found its way into a novel by Philip Woodruff.<sup>4</sup>

Rope sliding is mentioned by these authors most often as a quaint, improbable, and fascinating performance. Some have maintained that it is derived from a form of human sacrifice and Frazer cites it in *The Golden Bough* as an example of the use of a human scapegoat. In none of the accounts, however, is there a full description of the ceremony nor an attempt to analyze it in cultural context. In this paper, by briefly considering the nature of the ceremony and its variations, affinities and alterations, its status as a Hindu ceremony may be assessed and some features of Himalayan Hinduism and of village Hinduism in general may be illuminated.

## DESCRIPTION

The natural history of a performance of the feat in western Garhwal may be summarized as follows:<sup>5</sup> One or more residents of a village whose members have

1 This paper was presented in abbreviated form before the Southwestern Anthropological Association, Santa Barbara, April 1, 1961. The research upon which it is based was carried out in a village of western Garhwal during 1957-58 under a Ford Foundation fellowship. I would like to thank David G. Mandelbaum for his helpful comments on the paper.

2 Ahmed, 1891; Cockburn, 1894; Harcourt, 1871, pp. 318ff.; Moorcroft and Trebeck, 1841, pp. 17ff.; Mountaineer, 1860, pp. 41ff.; Rose, 1894b; Traill, 1828, pp. 224f. Cf. Grierson, 1916, pp. 1 ff.

3 E.g., Atkinson, 1884, pp. 834f.; Crooke, 1926, pp. 141f.; Frazer, 1913, pp. 196f.

4 Woodruff, 1947, pp. 50 ff.

5 This account is drawn primarily from descriptions by two informants who witnessed such a ceremony about thirty years ago in western Garhwal. Also helpful were the published sources cited above and an interview with Mr A. C. Chandola, a linguist at the University of California, Berkeley, who is a native of a village near Pauri, Garhwal.

been experiencing difficulties such as sickness or poor crops, or who are threatened with such difficulties, consult a shaman (*bākī*) to find out the source of the trouble. The shaman calls upon his familiar spirit which then possesses him and, in this case, announces that the troubles are being inflicted by the powerful god *Mahādev* (Siva) to show his displeasure with villagers' inadequate worship of him.<sup>6</sup> Certain villages which are especially devoted to Mahadev are most likely to attribute their troubles to this deity. It is in such villages that rope sliding occurs while in others, devoted to other gods, it may never occur.

The shaman's familiar spirit may tell villagers that the rope sliding ceremony is required or, upon finding from the shaman that Mahasu is displeased, villagers may simply assume that this ceremony is required as a result of their knowledge that it has not been performed for many years. In many cases villagers do not know whether Mahadev will demand this ceremony or a lesser one until they later hold a dance in his honor where he possesses ("comes to the head of") one of the villagers (not the shaman), dances in his body, and enunciates his demands through the mouth of that person. After learning that the rope sliding rite is required, villagers vow before the god to perform it. At this time their troubles are alleviated, but they must fulfill the vow or face worse punishment. They then approach a man of the untouchable entertainer caste known as *bēda* or *baddī*, to perform the feat. The members of this caste are reputed to be devotees of Mahadev and the men who perform the feat are said to prepare for it by a lifetime of intense devotion to that god. Since the *bēda* caste is a small one, the performer may have to be summoned from some distance.

When a *bēda* man has agreed to perform the ceremony, it is publicly announced that "bēda will slide." This occurs several months before the ceremony, and the interim is devoted to preparations. The *bēda* and his family travel from village to village throughout the area, dancing, singing, announcing their intention to slide, and collecting donations. Meanwhile, in the area in which I worked, rope-makers were hired to make a rope 200 to 1000 yards in length depending upon where it was to be used. In most areas reported by others the *bēda* himself made the rope. The rope is made of a special grass (*Spodipogon augustifolius*) used in the preparation of rope bridges, and is two or three inches in diameter when completed. It is carefully tested, and soaked in oil prior to use.

<sup>6</sup> Mahadev may also make his demands known by possessing a villager who is dancing on some occasion other than a shamanistic seance. Rope sliding is sometimes and in some places held periodically as a preventative measure without waiting until it is demanded. In the Sutlej valley it is held each twelve years at the Bihunda fair in honor of the goddess Ambika (mother of Paras Ram) and of local gods (see Harcourt, 1871; Rose, 1894b). Paras Ram is a reincarnation of Vishnu while Mahadev is identified with Siva. Sometimes the ceremony is described by informants as honoring Mahadev and his wife, Parvati.

A steep hill, cliff, or ravine has been selected as a site for the performance. Shortly beforehand the rope is stretched from top to bottom of the incline well clear of obstacles, and is secured to trees or posts at either end. A narrow wooden saddle, called a "horse," with a deep groove on the under side, is made by carpenters and is placed on the rope, secured by thongs or boards to the rope so that it cannot bounce off and yet can slide freely. The saddle and rope are similar in construction to one type of rope bridge used in the area.<sup>7</sup> The saddle is tied by a cord to the anchoring post at the upper end of the incline. The *bēda* must honor the god by riding the saddle down the slippery rope. At the lower end where the gradient of the rope decreases due to its own weight, a blanket or another rope is wrapped around it to increase its size and thereby brake the saddle and rider.

Near the upper end of the rope a pole is erected with a revolving horizontal cross-piece at the top. It is held in place with guy-ropes and is sufficiently stable to allow the *bēda* to sit or lie at one end of the cross-piece and whirl around, an activity known as *bartakhand* (rope ceremony, whirling).<sup>8</sup> I am informed that in the vicinity of Pauri, Garhwal, the pole is topped, not with a horizontal cross-piece, but with a stationary cone-shaped framework on the apex of which is a small circular platform or pivot. The *bēda* balances himself in a prone position on this platform and pivots on it by pushing with his hands against the framework below him. Whirling is not an integral part of the rope sliding ceremony in all areas. Where it is not, the platform may consist simply of a string cot suspended between four vertical posts.

On the appointed day people gather from many miles around to watch and derive benefit from the festive event. It is expected that the headman of each village in the area will attend to secure the benefits of the performance for all residents of his village. The *bēda* is bathed, dressed in white, and then carried through the assembled crowd on the back of the headman, elder or keeper of the temple of the host village. He is followed by his female relatives who dance as they go, and the *bēda* himself carries a tray upon which he receives donations.<sup>9</sup> As he goes he makes taunting, humorous, and obscene (and long-remembered) rhymes and comments about men in the crowd, who respond by giving him money to divert his attention to others. This is one of the highly ritualized occasions found widely over India in which a person of low status can publicly deride his caste superiors without fear of reprisal. The *bēda* may also announce peoples' names in honorific

<sup>7</sup> See Fraser, 1820, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Note the similarity to the hook-swinging apparatus described by Thurston (1903).

<sup>9</sup> In the Sutlej valley, according to Rose (1894b), funeral music is played as the *bēda* is carried to the rope, the five valuable items that are put in the mouth of a dying man are placed in his mouth, and his relatives mourn.

context in return for payment. He is carried to the pole or platform where he continues to perform and receive payment. There, if whirling is to be performed, he honors the headman of each village in ritual fashion by announcing the headman's name and whirling about a few times in his honor. This secures divine blessing not only to the man honored, but to all residents of the village he represents. In Pauri, Garhwal this was a ceremony separate from rope sliding. There the honoring of headmen was done in a traditional order of precedence. Any mistake on the part of the *bēda* in calling the names in order or in performing the feat was considered a bad omen which in former times might result in the execution of the *bēda*.

After the whirling performance, the rope sliding is held. A Brahmin conducts a ceremony worshipping the local gods and the god to whom the ceremony is dedicated. The *bēda* is blessed, rice is plastered on his forehead, and one or more goats are sacrificed to the gods to assure his success. The *bēda* is fed, receiving payment for each morsel of food he eats. He is then placed astride the saddle. Heavy bags of clay or sand, weighing perhaps forty pounds, are fastened to each leg, and are secured to his body with a shoulder harness. The bags are intended to help balance the *bēda* in his brief journey. In his hand the *bēda* holds a white cloth which he waves on the way down to honor the god and "to let people know he is coming." He then awaits a signal to assure him of divine protection before attempting the feat. In the case described in most detail to me, a rain shower had passed, the clouds parted and two white birds flew between them. They were assumed by the *bēda* to be Mahadev and his wife Parbati signalling their approval, so he gave a signal to an attendant, the cord holding the saddle was cut, and down he went at great speed, smoke trailing impressively behind as a result of friction between rope and saddle.<sup>10</sup>

At the bottom men stand ready to catch or assist the *bēda*. In this case the saddle stopped too suddenly and the *bēda* catapulted off but was caught by the waiting men who themselves sustained minor injuries. In a less successful earlier performance the rope was uneven and the saddle would not slide properly, so it had to be pushed much of the way. In a performance reported by Harcourt the saddle stuck, and while the rope was being tightened to facilitate the descent, it broke and the *bēda* fell to his death.<sup>11</sup> Cockburn and Traill both report that the *baddī* was killed by spectators if he fell in performing the feat, and this agrees with information on the ceremony as performed in Pauri, Garhwal. According

<sup>10</sup> Cockburn (1894, p. 206) notes that "two kites must hover over his head before this is done."

<sup>11</sup> Harcourt, 1871, p. 321.

to Moorcroft and Trebeck, however, people were stationed below to try to break his fall should he fall or the rope break.

When the *bēda* has successfully completed his ride he is carried to the dancing area near the village temple where some or all of the following relics of the performance are distributed among the assembled multitude: the *bēda*'s hair, his clothes, the clay from the bags on his feet, the rice that had been plastered on his forehead, small segments of the rope, and the soil that was heaped up at the base of the whirling pole. These are taken home by those who obtain them and are placed in their fields or houses to promote health, fertility, and prosperity. The saddle is placed in the house of the man who carried the *bēda* prior to the performance. The *bēda* is given additional money, jewelry, and clothing. He is thereafter greatly honored and in western Garhwal is known by a particular title (*bēdwārth*). According to my informants who knew an era and area where the feat was infrequently performed (every ten or fifteen years in an area of one hundred or more villages), the *bēda* would normally not be called upon to perform the feat again. Moorcroft, however, spoke to a man who had performed it sixteen times. The ceremony ends, as do many religious activities in this area, with a dance in honor of the village gods.

The danger in rope sliding is greatly emphasized and probably exaggerated in the folklore of the region. In many cases the rope is probably never far off the ground, and in any event the counterweights make falling highly unlikely. The main danger is that the rope might break. It is to guard against this that the *bēda* is generally reported to make the rope himself, just as in our culture parachute jumpers often prefer to pack their own parachutes. My informants told stories of fatal accidents, cowardly *bēdas* who backed out, hid, or turned into animals to avoid performing the feat. This folklore contributes to the public appeal of this event, to the respect and remuneration received by the *bēda*, and to public confidence in the efficacy of the performance in pleasing the god.

#### ANALYSIS

One of the first questions which comes to mind about this ceremony is: Is it Hindu? Is it not alien or pre-Hindu? It does not appear in the Hindu literature. It is limited in India to the Himalayan area and it in some ways resembles a Tibetan ceremony held annually in front of the Potala at Lhasa, in which men slide down a rope at great peril to life and limb to secure benefit to the Lama.<sup>12</sup> This raises further questions as to the nature and definition of Hinduism. Without going too deeply into this we can say that rope sliding may not be within

12 See Bell, 1946, p. 273; Crooke, 1926, p. 142; Waddell, 1905, pp. 397f.

the great literate tradition of Hinduism, but it is, as I shall show, similar in many respects to other ceremonies widespread in India and therefore it is well within the pan-Indian non-literate Hindu tradition. The term "Hinduism" cannot be used meaningfully to exclude either tradition. In considering the affinities of rope sliding it will be useful to follow Linton's terminology distinguishing form, function, meaning, and use.<sup>13</sup>

At first glance rope sliding, in form at least, appears to be unique to the Himalayan hills. That is, nowhere else in India that I know of do people slide down ropes in any manner resembling that described here. In many areas the terrain would prevent it even if it were known and desired. However, if one looks at the ritual activities of rope-walkers, acrobats, singers and dancers who go by the names *bēda*, *baddī*, or *nāt* elsewhere in India, he will find points of similarity in form which suggest a continuous range of performances to which rope sliding might be related.<sup>14</sup> This suggestion is made more plausible when one considers the closely related *ganer* ceremony of Kulu reported by Rose wherein a rope is necessary and some of the ritual forms are similar, but no sliding or any imitation thereof takes place.<sup>15</sup> He mentions another, probably related ceremony in the Beas valley of Kulu in which men are lowered over cliffs on ropes of their own making and are honored for this feat.<sup>16</sup>

The famous "hook-swinging" ceremony of South India, while different in many respects, bears formal similarities to rope sliding in the suspension of the low caste performer (who is not a *bēda*, however) at dangerous heights from a rope, and also in the whirling around of the performer on a pivoted horizontal piece atop a pole to honor the gods.<sup>17</sup> The similarities between the two in function, meaning, and use are even closer than in their form. Both avert difficulty by honoring gods who control fertility, health, and prosperity.

Tibetan rope sliding, mentioned above, shows some striking similarities to the ceremony described here. However, most travel between Tibet and the lower Himalayas is by Tibetan traders and herders rather than by Indians, and present evidence would indicate that rope sliding in Tibet is limited to Lhasa while it is

13 Linton describes the qualities of a trait complex as: *form*, ". . . the sum and arrangement of its component behavior patterns; in other words that aspect of the complex whose expressions can be observed directly . . .," *meaning*, ". . . the association which any society attaches to it," *use*, ". . . an expression of its relation to things external to the social-cultural configuration," and *function*, ". . . an expression of its relation to things within the configuration" (Linton, 1936, pp. 403f.).

14 See Crooke, 1896, pp. 333f.; Russell, 1916, pp. 289ff.

15 Rose, 1894a.

16 Rose, 1894b, pp. 56f.

17 See Dubois, 1906, pp. 597ff.; Thurston, 1903.

fairly widespread in the lower Himalayas. It therefore seems more likely that the ceremony moved from India to Tibet than the reverse. Moreover, performances in the two areas are more similar in form than in function, meaning, and use.

Local and regional variations appear in the form of the rope sliding ceremony within the lower Himalayas just as they do in other aspects of culture.<sup>18</sup> These are typical of the distributions and variations which give regional and local variety to Hindu Indian culture. They account for many of the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in the accounts of this and other ceremonies by different authors, and they point up the importance of specifying the level of abstraction at which one is working if culture areas based on trait distributions are to be delimited in India.

Thus, though rope sliding is superficially unique to the Himalayan hills, on closer analysis it can be seen as but one formal variant of a pattern of worship widespread in Hinduism. This similarity of rope sliding to other Hindu ceremonies becomes more obvious when phrased in terms of function, meaning, and use.

The use of the rope sliding ceremony is the same as that of a vast range of ceremonies in village Hinduism—to alleviate or avoid difficulties, especially sterility, illness, and crop failure.

The meaning of the ceremony revolves around the belief that supernatural beings are responsible for most human difficulties and that many of these difficulties are caused by deities as a means of displaying their anger or disappointment at being neglected—at not being properly worshipped. This is reflected in the widespread pattern of worship. When trouble strikes, man must first find its source, and this can most often be accomplished through the agency of a shaman whose personal spirit has direct access to information about the supernatural. He must then find what specific demands the god will make. By meeting these demands he can protect himself from the god's wrath. Generally the god demands gifts (including sacrifices), entertainment, ordeals, or mortification by the devotee.

The prevalence of dangerous performances and mortification in this context may be related to the fact that the god vents his wrath because he feels neglected. To appease him attention must be focused on him. To honor the god by publicly putting a man in pain or in danger—in the case of rope sliding by placing him literally between life and death—is to focus attention on the god to the highest degree and so to placate the god most effectively.<sup>19</sup> Abbé Dubois has stated that:<sup>20</sup>

18 See Berreman, 1960.

19 For this point I am indebted to David Mandelbaum.

20 Dubois, 1906, p. 600.

This tendency of Hindus to submit their bodies to severe and often cruel tortures, or to spend their means in costly offerings, is manifested whenever they find themselves in critical circumstances, and particularly in times of sickness.

There is not a single Hindu who does not in such cases make a vow to perform something more or less onerous on condition that he is delivered safe and sound from his unfortunate predicament.

This "tendency" is widespread in the world. In India it is expressed in performance of the rope sliding ceremony, the whirling ceremony, hook-swinging, fire-walking, and in many cases of fasting, sacrifice, offering, or pilgrimage; in short, in almost any religious activity common in village India. All of these activities focus attention upon and honor the gods to whom they are dedicated. The sequence: trouble leading to consultation with a shaman whose information results in taking a vow and ultimately performance of the promised action to honor the god, is found almost everywhere in India.<sup>21</sup> In the Himalayan hills, the more serious the oversight, neglect, or misdeed by the worshippers and the more powerful the god, the more dangerous are the consequences and the more rigorous are the demands. The more expensive, spectacular, or difficult the performance or offering, the more efficacious it is. Rope sliding is a performance demanded of those who worship him by the powerful god Mahadev, and if it is not carried out the entire community will suffer severely. Other gods demand other ceremonies, but the over-all pattern is the same. These ceremonies are a major focus of the religious life of those who perform them.

There has been some speculation about the meaning of the ceremony by several of those who have described it. Frazer described it not only ". . . as a propitiation of Mahadeva . . . performed as a means of delivering a community from present or impending calamity," but also as an example of the use of a "human scapegoat."<sup>22</sup> There is, however, little evidence to support the latter contention, for the *bēda* is honored for the feat rather than being banished thereafter; relics of the performance which are most closely associated with him are sought by community members, and it is a bad omen if he should not survive. A scapegoat would hardly be treated in this fashion. If it is true, as Traill reports, that the *bēda* becomes sterile as a result of the performance, one might assume that he had taken onto himself the sterility plaguing community members. There are, however, no other reports of the *bēda* assuming the difficulties of the community he serves nor is there any associated ritual activity which would suggest such a transfer.

Rose<sup>23</sup> and Cockburn assert that rope sliding is a form or derivative of human

21 Cf. Harper, 1957; Opler, 1958, p. 554.

22 Frazer, 1913, pp. 196f.

23 Rose, 1894b.



sacrifice. If so, it would not be unique in India. Human sacrifice is described in the *Kali Purana* and is widely reported for earlier times in both tribal and Hindu India, especially in the Himalayan area.<sup>24</sup> Rope sliding as practiced in Garhwal, however, shows no evidence of sacrificial intent. On the contrary, every precaution is taken to protect the *bēda*, and he is rarely killed in the performance. In view of this, the preparations for the *bēda*'s death which precede the ceremony in the Sutlej valley as reported by Rose might be interpreted as insurance against the unhappy possibility of the *bēda*'s death, to assure him a satisfactory place in the hereafter, and to protect those who have sent him on his dangerous journey from his potentially angry spirit, rather than as evidence of intent to sacrifice.<sup>25</sup>

Both Cockburn and Traill report that in former times the *bēda* was killed by bystanders if, despite precautions, he fell. This was also true in both the whirling ceremony and the rope sliding ceremony in Pauri, Garhwal. It is not indicative of sacrificial intent, however. The performance was held to honor the god by a performer who was assumed to be a devotee of that god. If it was done properly, the god was pleased, trouble was averted, and the performer was honored. If the performer fell or otherwise failed to properly perform the ceremony, it was considered to be a bad omen; it offended the god or was evidence that the god was offended by the performer. Moreover, the performer was thereby proved to be an inauspicious person who would bring further difficulty to the community. He was therefore dispatched to protect the village from further divine retribution. He had failed to appease the god, offending him instead, and he was best removed from the scene. His heirs, in such a case, received no payment. The performance was considered to have been a failure.

The important point is that in no place was the death of the *bēda* sought or considered other than inauspicious. It was everyone's hope and intent that he should succeed, for only then would the god be satisfied and the village prosper. It was a bad omen if the *bēda* failed; there was rejoicing if he succeeded. In a sacrifice the reverse is true: it is a bad omen if the victim survives even briefly; a good omen if it is sacrificed expeditiously. There is therefore no evidence that this is a sacrificial ceremony. If in the Sutlej area it has acquired some of the trappings of sacrifice, it has probably done so because it occasionally resulted in death rather than because death was the intended result. The primary meaning of the ceremony seems always to have been the propitiation of a deity by the performance of a spectacular, expensive, and dangerous feat in his honor which had the effect of focusing attention upon him to a maximal degree.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Basham, 1954, pp. 336f.; Cockburn, 1894; Dubois, 1906, pp. 645ff.; Francke, 1914, pp. 4, 12f.

<sup>25</sup> There is great fear, at least in this area, of the restless spirit of a person who has died unprepared or improperly mourned.

The functions of the rope sliding rite are numerous but, like its meaning and use, are common to many Hindu ceremonies. Above all, it relieves anxiety by reassuring people in the face of impending calamity. It is likely to be performed when, for example, a cholera epidemic threatens an area in which the god Mahadev is worshipped prominently. At the same time a rash of other ceremonies and sacrifices occur, all aimed at appeasing the gods and thereby protecting the village. The *bēda* with whom Moorcroft talked was credited with having saved his part of Garhwal from cholera when he performed the feat during an epidemic. In the village in which I worked, where Mahadev was not the most important god, a low caste woman saved the village from a cholera epidemic by becoming possessed of the goddess who was causing the illness there, and directing villagers in the correct propitiatory worship.<sup>26</sup> The rope sliding ceremony therefore functions as does much ritual in village India and reflects the "prevailing health anxiety" described by Opler.<sup>27</sup> It does this on a village or regional scale rather than, as is more commonly the case, on a family, lineage, or local caste level, but there are other ceremonies of community scope in Hinduism such as the village protection rite performed in this hill area.<sup>28</sup>

A distinction can be made in the village of my research between "household gods" and "village gods." The former are worshipped on a household (joint family or sometimes lineage) basis and their effects are felt by household groups. The village gods, such as Mahadev, affect the entire community and are usually worshipped on a village-wide basis.<sup>29</sup>

Like the village protection rite and various agricultural ceremonies which honor village gods, rope sliding is sponsored by the village at large. All are expected to participate and all who participate reap the benefits. Participation and consequent benefit actually extend far beyond the village, though the sponsoring village is always more deeply involved than others. Since it requires the participation of several castes and benefits all of them, it has an integrative function, emphasizing the interdependence of villagers and their common ties to the locality. A shaman, who in this area is usually of an untouchable caste, identifies the trouble and often is instrumental in determining remedial action.<sup>30</sup> A Brahmin carries out worship of

26 Berreman, 1959, p. 192.

27 Opler, 1958.

28 Berreman, 1959, pp. 183ff., 206ff., 219.

29 *Idem*, pp. 168ff.

30 Shamans may be of any caste but in this area the great majority of them, as of most supernatural practitioners, are of low caste. In the lower Himalayas there are no Sudra castes. All castes whose counterparts on the plains of India would be Sudras are here untouchable *dōms* and it is from these castes that most shamans come. Cf. Berreman, 1960, pp. 775f.

the god to be honored and of other village gods. Music is provided by village musicians, an untouchable caste. The saddle is made by carpenters; the rope may be made by a special rope-maker caste; and images symbolic of the gods being worshipped are made by the blacksmith. The untouchable *bēda* performs the feat itself. All of these people are in the employ of high caste agriculturalists who contribute most heavily to the support of the ceremony. All of these groups depend upon one another, albeit the distribution of power among them is less than equitable.

At this time factional splits, traditional animosities along kin and caste lines, are suppressed and all are expected to cooperate for the common good. This drawing together comes when it is most needed, at a time of crisis, for it is at times of crisis that rope sliding is performed. The need to perform a community ceremony may lead to enforced resolution of disruptive conflicts in order that all may participate. The death of a prominent and highly respected woman in the village I studied had such a result when factional differences threatened to prevent the proper celebration of her funeral. Of course, more serious conflicts may actually prevent the performance, or the proper performance, of such a ceremony. Cases of this kind are also on record, but they are unusual.<sup>31</sup>

Rope sliding, like most other village religious activities, and like fairs has an important social function. People from a wide area converge on one place, exchange news, and find amusement in one another's company. It affords enjoyable entertainment and a welcome diversion, on a grand scale, from normal routine just as a sacrifice, seance, or dance does on a smaller scale.

As with many ceremonies, rope sliding provides a means to acquire prestige among those who support it. Religious ceremonies are one of the relatively few approved outlets for conspicuous expenditure of wealth in this area and rope sliding is one of the most expensive of these. There is an opportunity for all to acquire prestige because support is solicited from the entire community and from all residents of other villages who can be induced to attend. High caste agriculturalists are the primary ones to derive prestige in this manner because they are in the best position to contribute money or goods.

The ceremony also provides an arena in which individual low caste participants, especially *bēdas* and shamans, can acquire prestige and can exert initiative and influence that is otherwise denied them; influence that is far out of proportion to their low social and ritual status and their dependent economic condition. In a sense this may be an integrative function too in so far as it serves as a balance and possible "safety valve" for the expression of suppressed feelings and capabili-

31 See Berreman, 1959, pp. 211, 534f.

ties and the realization of otherwise inaccessible aspirations by depressed groups in this rigidly hierarchical and inequalitarian society.

This is a feature of Indian village religious ceremony which is often under-emphasized. In the part of the lower Himalayas with which I am most familiar, I would venture to say that Brahmins play a smaller and much less creative role in village religion than do various, usually low caste, non-Brahmanical practitioners such as shamans, diviners, exorcists, and spell-casters. Low caste shamans diagnose difficulties and often recommend corrective action. Low caste practitioners direct most of the activities calculated to appease the deities or exorcise the spirits. They cast spells, counteract spells, detect theft, find lost objects, cure illness, foretell the future, read omens, and do a host of related activities. It is they who determine what gods are worshipped, in what manner, and under what circumstances. They introduce new gods and forms of worship and occasionally eliminate old ones. They often determine or influence who in the community has to perform a ceremony, when it must be performed, and how expensive it will be. In this role they not infrequently pass judgment on disputes. They hold the welfare of particular households or entire villages in their hands. They do this not as low caste people, but as technical experts or as vehicles for the voices of the supernatural. They are not unaware of their role, however, as they point out their indispensibility to the community with evident satisfaction. The most effective limitation to their power over their clients is that they are numerous and specialized. Their clients do not hesitate to consult others of their profession if the advice of one seems inaccurate or unreasonable, and no one practitioner is competent in all types of cases. Brahmins, by contrast, are important mainly in life-cycle ceremonies and in performing formal worship. The relatively minor role of the Brahmin in the rope sliding ceremony is typical of his role in the ceremonial life of this culture area. It would be worth while to investigate the religious roles of Brahmins and non-Brahmin practitioners elsewhere in India with regard to their spheres of influence and their potential for innovation in religious behavior and belief.

#### COMMENTS ON CHANGE

The decline in prevalence of rope sliding is not adequately explained by describing the roles of these religious practitioners. At one time rope sliding was held frequently enough that Moorcroft was able to interview a man in about 1820, who had performed it sixteen times and Traill commented in 1828 that "no fatal accident has occurred from the performance of this ceremony since 1815, though it is probably celebrated at not less than fifty villages each year."<sup>32</sup> By the latter

32 Traill, 1828, p. 224.

half of the nineteenth century, the practice was said to be outlawed in British territory, persisting only in the princely state of Tehri Garhwal and perhaps in other independent territories.<sup>33</sup> At the Nirmand fair in the Sutlej valley in 1868, and thereafter, a goat was substituted for the *bēda* as a result of the ceremony's having been outlawed following a fatal accident,<sup>34</sup> and for many years in the vicinity of Pauri, Garhwal, an image has replaced the *bēda* as a result of British regulations. However, British sanctions have not been the only factors which have led to decline in the ceremony. Economy may have played a part. In the area of my work a milder ceremony (*bartatōr*: rope sliding, breaking) was often performed under circumstances similar to those which inspired rope sliding. In this version a rope was stretched and a wooden frame representing a man was moved along it. Later a *bēda* rubbed his hand over it, after which it was broken in a tug-o-war, whereupon Mahadev was thought to be satisfied. This ceremony was doubtless used long before the British outlawed the sliding feat, evidently as a cheaper alternative. The *bēda* got two rupees and some grain, an infinitesimal cost when compared to the cost of rope sliding.

A third factor in the disappearance of rope sliding is what might be called "plainsward mobility." That is, the trend toward adoption of the behaviors of plains dwellers. The goal of many hill people is to be acceptable or respected in the eyes of plains people with whom they are increasingly in contact and who are usually in positions of relative advantage as officials, merchants, tourists, keepers of temples, etc. This involves adoption of behaviors which, in the hill man's view, will counteract the prevalent "hill-billy" stereotype of the hill man. This means, besides adopting plains customs, giving up (at least before outsiders) things that are reprehensible by plains standards and also things which are merely distinctive of hill people. Prominent among these are buffalo sacrifice, bride-price, polyandry, and other conspicuous features subject to ridicule by plains people, including the rope sliding ceremony.

The extent to which this process occurs depends, of course, on the amount and kind of contact between hill and plains people in any given area. This is not an unusual process in India. It is of the same order as "Sanskritization," described by Srinivas, which has been involved in the mobility of castes from time immemorial.<sup>35</sup> It resembles Westernization and urbanization, both of which have been prominent in India for many years. Plainsward mobility combines elements

33 In the area in which I worked it was last performed about thirty years ago. Very likely it has been performed more recently in other, perhaps more remote, areas. It is performed to the present day in the vicinity of Pauri, Garhwal, with an image substituted for a man in the saddle.

34 Harcourt, 1871, p. 321; Rose, 1894b.

35 Srinivas, 1952, pp. 212ff.

of each of these processes to the extent that the plains people whom hill people attempt to emulate are Sanskritized, Westernized, and urbanized. Its result is, among other things, a decreased demand for the rope sliding ceremony. Perhaps another result is a decrease in the importance of the shaman relative to the Brahmin in village religious life as Sanskritic values take hold.

At the same time the performers themselves, *bēdas*, are both upwardly and plainswardly mobile. Consequently they are reluctant to play their traditional role in the ceremony, a role which identifies them as hill people of very low status. Recently, for precisely these reasons, the *bēdas* in the area of my research had given up most of their entertainment and ritual functions, and they planned to give them up entirely in order to become farmers.<sup>36</sup>

In the processes of change to which it has been subjected, rope sliding therefore follows a pattern of change in ceremonial usage, under conditions of outside contact and social mobility, common to much of India.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The Himalayan rope sliding ceremony, while spectacular, need not be viewed as a unique and inexplicable performance. It is a Hindu ceremony well within the range of ceremonies found in villages throughout India. That is, it is equivalent in function, meaning and use to many ceremonies of propitiation of deities in India. In form it is distinctive but even in this respect it is not without affinities elsewhere in India, for similar and probably related forms can be cited. It might best be described as a sub-regional expression of a pan-Indian tradition.<sup>37</sup> That such a pan-Indian tradition exists outside of the literate tradition emphasizes the importance of recognizing the dimension of "spread" of traditions<sup>38</sup> within civilizations as well as the "great" and "little" traditions.<sup>39</sup> Hinduism and Indian civilization are characterized as much by their non-literate traditions as by their literate traditions. Some of the former are as widespread as the latter, and are doubtless known and practiced by far more people than many aspects of the literate tradition. Little and local traditions must not be confused, for "little" traditions are often of all-India spread.

Rope sliding exemplifies the necessity of viewing Hinduism in the totality of its expressions; in meaning, function, and use as well as form, and in viewing each aspect in cultural context. When this is done, Himalayan Hinduism, as exemplified by Pahari-speaking Hindus, will be seen as a regional variant of the all-Indian

36 See Berreman, 1959, p. 119.

37 Cf. Cohn and Marriott, 1958, p. 2.

38 Srinivas, 1952, pp. 213ff.

39 Redfield, 1956, pp. 70ff.

and North Indian Hindu traditions rather than, as has often been asserted, a peculiarly deviant, degraded, or attenuated form of Hinduism or even a non-Hindu "tribal" religion. Pahari-speakers are not more tribal by religion than by language, economy, or any other aspect of their culture. By almost any criterion that may be applied they are a distinctive subgroup within the North Indian "genetic unit"<sup>40</sup> and the North Indian culture area.

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