The best way to know about the life of people is through the study of their fairs, festivals, customs and manners. To appreciate cultural heritage of people, we have to free ourselves from preconceived biases. The way of life of the people of Himachal Pradesh has been brilliantly expressed in their fairs and festivals.

For these reasons, acquaintance with the life of the hill people can be of great help in understanding the background and close relationship of these cultural activities with the hills.

Broadly speaking, Himachal culture can be divided into three groups each distinguished by recurring themes of Hinduism and Buddhism. These are:

1. Indigenous, the Munda speaking people, Kol and the Khashas, who migrated to the hills from the Indian plains and from the north west through Himalayan valleys are the earliest settlers. These two cultural groups met and fused into new composite culture and tradition known as the indigenous or Khasha culture. After then many came through the Western Himalayan passes, brought their religion, custom and language, settled here and in due course of time got absorbed into the main stream. The people of this cultural group are spread in the mid-Himalayan belt from Chamba to Sirmour. They form nearly
75% of the population. The people are bound to gather by ties of common religion. The people have, by and large, maintained their original form of worship. The large majority, in Hindu by faith are devoted to traditional gods. The people have a firm, almost blind, belief in the village deities, whether the deity is a Divine, a hero, or otherwise, it is termed as Deota, because it is the source of inspiration for all the villagers. Every village has a temple where they congregate for common worship. The village deotas are carried in palanquins on a number of occasions to places of religious interest and fairs and festivals are held. The legends relating to the gods and goddesses are numerous. They depict the stories of their origin and miracles. These stories in praise of their origin and are generally sung by the bards during the fairs and festivals. During their annual festivals, to please their deotas, sacrifices are also offered, to them. The festivals and fairs provide the occasion to the deotas and people alike to dance and sing together.

The most important and popular festivals and fairs of these people are Bhoj, celebrated by Kolis of Upper Shimla hills, Shant by Khasha, and by their kith and kin Kanets in the same area; Kahika in Mandi-Kullu area and Bhunda in Kullu, Shimla hills and even in Garhwal. In Brahaur area of Chamba which is the home of Gaddi celebrate Nawal and Brahaur Jatar. The Gaddis are worshipper of Shiva and on this occasion
they sacrifice goat to him. The main attraction is deota and his dance along with his worshippers. The archery game also provides amusement to the young people. The women of these areas do not intermingle with the people in the fair but they sit on the terraces and enjoy the dance and songs. They exchange mura ( parched rice or wheat) apricot nuts, walnuts and chew them.

In the second group comes the people of Indo-Aryan origin. These people penetrated from the south. The people of this culture came from the Indian plains from time to time for a number of reasons. The most important reason was the location of holy places in and around Himachal area. High caste Hindus migrated to the hills during the Muslim invasions on north India from the 12th century to the sixteenth century. The distinctive features of their culture was the caste system, Vaishnavism and Brahmanical observations. Most of the migrants were from the ruling class, accompanied by Brahmins they established small principalities in the Shivaliks and lower Himalayan valleys and quickly they established their hold over the aboriginies and ultimately became the masters of the land. They enforced on them their religious beliefs, customs and manners. Those people inhabited lower Ravi, Beas, Satluj and Yamuna valleys. Their fairs and festivals are influenced by Vaishnava Dharma. The notable one
are Holi, Dashehra, Diwali and to same extent Shivaite festival of Shivratri. There are examples where these chiefs invited the indigenous goddlings to pay homage to their Vaishnoute gods of Raghunath of Kullu and Mado Rai of Mandi during the annual festivals of Kullu Dashehra and Shivratri fair. Similarly during the Renuka fair local gods come to pay their homage to Parshurama, who is considered one of the Vishnu's avtar.

The third cultural group is Indo-Mongoloid known as Kiratas in Sanskrit literature and Bhotas to the moderns. The people of this culture under unfavourable political and economic conditions crossed the high Himalayan passes from the north east and settled in the northern most fringes and after a lapse of centuries got assimilated with the locals. Their characteristics features were Tibeto-Himalayan language, lamastic Buddhism and livestock raising. These people are today inhabiting Kinnaur, Lahaul and Spiti high altitude areas of Himachal Pradesh. In the medieval period many monasteries were founded in this area amongst which Tabo, Dhankar, Kanam, Kye are notable. The whole cultural actives of these people rotates around these monasteries. Their fairs and festivals are held in and around those monasteris. The main part in conducting these festivities are conducted by Lamas. They perform special dance on these occasions which is known as 'Devil Dance' to the outside world. They put on special dresses and masks and enact a dance drama wherein the
victory of the good is shown over the evil. In the
functions local tea and chang is freely used. The early
nineteenth century was the period of great adversity
to the people of Himachal Pradesh. The Gurkhas of Nepal
over ran the hill country in 1805 and penetrated upto
Kangra. They were expelled from there in 1809 AD but
this again paved the way for the equally adversory Sikh
people. The Gurkhas remained in possession of the area
lying between Yamuna and Satluj upto 1815 AD when they
were defeated and compelled to retire to their country
by the Britishers. The Sikhs remained in the Kangra
valley upto 1845 when they were defeated by the
Britishers and on account of this the area between
Satluj and Ravi rivers came under the British
administraton in India. The Gurkhas and Sikh
occupations in the history of Himachal Pradesh is
considered to be a period of great suppression. They
did not spare the religious place. It is also said that
Gurkhas wanted to take idol of goddess Durga of Hatkoti
to Nepal but they could not find the end of one of the
leg of the idol in the end. Therefore they left it.
It is also fact that the Sikh army ravaged the Kye
monastery in 1841 AD. On account of these occupation
the cultural activities like fairs and festivals
received a great set-back. During the occupation of
Rampur Bashahr by the Gurkhas no Tibetan and Kinnauri
goods were brought to Rampur and hence there was no Lavi
fair. Similarly during the occupation of Mandi and
Kullu by the Sikhs, the Shivratri and Kullu Dashehra received a great blow. People feared to bring out their deotas to the fair last they may fall pray to the greedy eyes of the occupants.

The Britishers also came as conquerers but they brought peace and tranquility to the area. They did not interfere in the religious affairs of the people. In order to understand history and culture of the people they collected data on the fairs, festivals, custom and manners of the hill people. They encouraged the cultural activities and saved some of the dying fairs like Lavi fair by investing wool trade from Tibet to Rampur instead of Ladakh and Srinagar. They used to take great interest in the local fairs as is by Sir Edward J.Buch in his famous book 'Simla Past and Present.' The local residents of Simla (Shimla) were fond of Sipi fair held near Mashobra. H.Lee. Shuttleworth I.C.S. who was Commissioner of Kullu also visited 1919's Nirmand Bhunda festival and left for us an interesting account of the Rope Sliding ceremony held there. History of Bilaspur records that Nalwari, the cattle fair of Bilaspur was started by Mr.V.Goldstien, Superintendent, Simla (Shimla) hill State in 1889 A.D. During the British time the princess also encouraged these cultural activities and the best example of such participation by the rulers were that of Chamba where Raja used to take part in Minjar fair and Raja of Mandi
in Shivratri fair. The Holi of Tira-Sujanpur was famous one and Raja Sansar, the great patron of Pahari painting used to play with the commoners. During the Dashehra the ruling chiefs used to attend Vijai Dashmi celebrations.

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries some trading communities like Bunias in Hindus and Phandias (from Phand meaning bundles) in Muslims came to the hills. They used to bring small merchandise and sell in the fairs and festivals and with the passing of time it started to come a regular feature and thus those fairs and festivals became markets to the local people.

Probably with them came some Muslim saints who did not move beyond Shiwalik hills. Some Hindu became their followers as is evident from the legends connected with some fairs of Kangra region. To quote these are:- Bhikhe Shah fair of Dhawarna, Mela Shah Abdul Rehman in Nurpur Tehsil, and Mela Pir Mha of Basla village in tehsil Dehra-Gopipur.

The British supremacy provided internal and external peace to the hills and valleys. More and more people, men, women and children and their deotas started to attend their fairs. Men, more than their women came ladden with silver and gold jewellary to the melas and no one could dare to look at them with an evil eye. There was no fear of any undesired element. People used
to travel from state to another to attend melas and enjoy the songs and dance of other states. The sweets of the melas were taken home to the children and relatives. These melas were the only source of recreation for the hill people. They provided a good chance to the people to surviving their age old cultural heritage.

Now with the opening of hills and valleys especially after 1950 more and more alien influences have started to penetrate to the centuries old secluded areas. These influences have been effecting their environment. Simple village folk are shrinking to attend the fairs and their place is being taken by the officials and business from the big cities and towns. The old patterns are now replaced by the ministers, members of Vidhan Sabha and Deputy Commissioners. Instead of folk dances and song now stage managed functions are held. Exhibitions of different departments and sports of schools and colleges are held. As such these fairs are now becoming government melas.