

RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN ASIA



Asaf Sharabi

The Biography of a God

Mahasu in the Himalayas

Amsterdam
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Religion and Society in Asia

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Mahasu in the Himalayas

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To Laya and Alon

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Notes on Transliteration

This book contains words, terms, and phrases in the Hindi and Pahari languages. In some books that include these languages the writers use the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IASTA). Since this book is intended not only for scholars, I have avoided such formal forms of transliteration and the use of diacritics. I realize that this may lead to inaccurate readings of some words, particularly the name of the deity Chalda, which in the IASTA system would be written as Cāldā.

The names of people, places, and gods from the Hindu pantheon are not spelled with diacritics or italicized. For words that are commonly used in English and familiar to a general audience (for example, *shakti*, *Mahabharata*) I have used italics. In some places I have also added an English plural suffix to a Hindi or Pahari word for clarity, such as making the plural of *devta*, “deity” in Hindi, into *devtas*.

I only use diacritics for the names of local deities, which are given in parentheses or endnotes where the name first appears in the text. My area of research is extensive and encompasses a variety of Pahari dialects. Some words, including the names of the deities, are pronounced differently in each region. For example, the deity pronounced as Kailu in Jaunsar-Bawar is pronounced Kaulu in the Jubbal region. In such cases, I have chosen to standardize using the pronunciation of the Jubbal region, where I conducted most of my research. I have mentioned in the endnotes other pronunciations that I encountered in other areas of Mahasu’s territory.

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Meet Mahasu

On our first visit to the main temple of Mahasu in Hanol, my two companions and I were joined by a young man named Nitin. On the way back he suggested that we stop at Koti, a small, picturesque village a few kilometers from Hanol. Chalda Mahasu, a local god known for his many magical deeds, was staying in the village at the time. Although we were excited to meet Chalda and his entourage for the first time, night had fallen and it was raining. There was no direct access to Koti by car, so the journey involved a twenty-minute walk through a forest along a path that not even Nitin was familiar with. After some discussion, we decided to visit Koti some other time in the daylight. Two days later, the three of us visited Chalda without Nitin. The next day, when we told Nitin we had visited Chalda without him, he told us in frustration that he had tried and failed to visit Chalda three times in the last two weeks. He told us, “The old people would say Chalda doesn’t want to meet me right now, not yet. He is playful like that. You cannot choose when to see him; he will choose for you. Chalda has his own ideas; he does what he wants.”

This episode, which took place a few days after we first arrived in the field, introduced Chalda’s teasing personality and opened a window to the interesting and complex relationship between the villagers and the local gods. This complexity is expressed not only in how the locals personify the deity, but also in how they deal with the idea of wandering gods that can be conversed with through human mediums in the context of the growing popularity of opposing (modern and pan-Indian) perceptions. “The adults would say so,” Nitin said when asked to explain Chalda’s trickery. But what about the young people? What about Nitin himself? Did he believe that Chalda was playing games with his followers?

Chalda is one of four deities—Botha, Chalda, Bashik, and Pabasi—that are believed to be brothers whose joint name is Mahasu.¹ The Western

¹ Mahasu, Botha, Bashik, and Chalda are usually pronounced the same throughout Mahasu’s territory: Mahāsū, Boṭhā, Bāśik, and Cāldā. Pabasi is usually pronounced Pabāsī in the Jubbal region, while in Uttarakhand it is pronounced Pavāsī/Pawāsī.

Himalayas abound with village goddesses (*devis*) and gods (*devtas*) like the Mahasu brothers. In each village are a few *devis* and *devtas*, each dwelling in trees, stones, or statues. Some of them have a small shrine or large temple (*mandir*) that has been dedicated to them. Some deities are connected with only one or a few villages, while others, like Mahasu, are associated with a wide area that consists of dozens or more villages.

Each of the villagers in the Western Himalayas has a family god (*kul devta*) or goddess (*kul devi*), and their belief in this deity is passed down through generations. The villagers also believe in and worship other deities, who are of great importance in the lives of the locals. Villagers consult with them through human mediums, discussing health, livelihoods, family issues, and disputes. The deities can heal, give advice, express opinions, judge, and make decisions about the lives of their followers.

Some *devtas*, such as the Mahasu brothers, are considered kings (*raja*). As royal divinities, each of them has a territory (*desh*) of their own, through which they move by palanquins (*palki*), or other objects. The *devtas* move beyond their own territories to meet with other *devtas* or to go for a pilgrimage (*yatra*). Meetings with other *devtas* occur in annual events or on special occasions, such as the inauguration of a new temple or the reconstruction of an old one (*pratishtha*). By moving through space, the *devtas* spread their political and religious power with the help of signs (*nishan*) such as images (*murtis*), swords, maces, and thrones. As rulers, these *devtas* also have judicial authority, which can be manifested through human mediums and objects.²

This system of governance by deities demonstrates some aspects of a concrete notion of divinity. As rulers, the deities are experienced in a tangible way through mediums and objects. They are visible; they move; they express their feelings and thoughts by physical means; and they can speak with their followers in audible ways. This is somewhat different from deities in the Brahminic-Puranic tradition, where the perception of gods is more abstract and sedentary. A concrete notion of divinity is not strange to Hinduism, especially when compared to Judaism or Islam. To start with, in Hinduism, images of the gods are present and worshipped. Indeed, most Hindus interpret the images of the deities as their literal embodiment rather than merely a symbol or representation.³ Still, it is possible to discern an even more significantly concrete conception of the deities in the Western Himalayas.

2 For ethnographic literature describing the main characteristics of these royal deities, see Berti, 2009a, 2009b; Luchesi, 2006; Sax, 2003, 2006; Sutherland, 2003, 2004, 2006.

3 Flueckiger, 2015: 78.

Along with this belief in local deities there is also belief in the pan-South Asian Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses: Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, Ganesha, Durga, Kali, and so on. In Mahasu's territory, there are temples to some of these gods and goddesses, both inside villages and along the winding roads. Some of the village deities are linked to gods from the Hindu pantheon, especially Shiva and Vishnu. This is the case for the Mahasu brothers, who are usually regarded as a manifestation of Shiva.

The joint kingdom of the Mahasu brothers is divided between them so that each brother has theistic control over a different territory. Together, they control parts of Shimla district in the state of Himachal Pradesh and parts of Dehradun and Uttarkashi districts in the state of Uttarakhand.⁴ The British ruled this area, either indirectly or directly, from the beginning of the nineteenth century until India gained independence in 1947. British colonial administrators documented the ecological, economic, political, and religious system in this region, as they did in the rest of the Indian sub-continent. These records provide (albeit partial) details about the belief in Mahasu during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From these texts emerges the threatening figure of Mahasu, who spreads fear amongst the locals and forces them to accept his divinity.⁵ Notably, in my fieldwork I found that today almost no trace remains of this terrifying character. This change in the concept of divinity is one of many socio-religious changes that are taking place in the twenty-first century in the Western Himalayas: some gods have ceased to roam, some gods have switched to a vegetarian diet, more abstract conceptions of divinity have become widespread, and there is a deepening connection of local deities to the pantheon of Hindu gods—to name only a few. The main question that arises in this context is: What role does Mahasu play in the locals' lives today? He used to be perceived as a royal god who ruled a particular territory, but does this concept still prevail? Do other perceptions of him play a more central role in their lives?

Another question that arises from the changes in the identities of Mahasu and other local gods is: Who is responsible for these changes? Is it the administration of the gods? Public opinion? Or is it perhaps the gods themselves? This issue centers on the theoretical question of the apparent

4 Mahasu temples can also be found in other nearby areas as well, including the Sirmour district of Himachal Pradesh.

5 In discussion, followers of Mahasu usually referred to Mahasu in the singular, which sometimes indicated all four Mahasu brothers but other times referred only to one brother, Botha. In this book I refer to Mahasu in both the plural and singular; to reduce confusion, I specifically mention Botha when required, instead of just calling him Mahasu.

gap between the perception of the gods by believers and by anthropologists. While believers see gods as autonomous entities responsible for their own fate and that of human beings, many ethnographers do not accept this assumption when embarking on fieldwork. In many ethnographies, deities and spirits are seen as reflecting social constructs, symbolizing power relations, or serving as a resource for individuals.⁶ This gap between the perception of anthropologists and that of the people they study is related to a more general question of religious belief—how should anthropologists and other researchers who study religion deal with religious claims regarding the truth? Ethnographers have formulated different methodological strategies to address this issue.

James Bielo lists four methodological positions that anthropologists generally take when discussing the issue of supernatural belief.⁷ The first, methodological atheism, assumes that religious claims about truth are irrelevant to the work of anthropologists, whose role is to treat religion as a human product and explain it in the context of social, cultural, and material conditions. As the sociologist Peter Berger states, “rigorous brackets” should be placed around the question of whether religious meaning is more than a product of human activity and human consciousness.⁸

The second strategy, methodological agnosticism, treats religious claims about truth as not off limits but, rather, as unknowable for the anthropologist. While accepting this impossibility of knowing, anthropologists must try to understand the importance of religion in the lives of adherents. Following the anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard, the ethnographers who follow this strategy should primarily emphasize the meaning and social significance of the belief and religious rites.⁹

The third strategy, methodological ludism, suggests that the anthropologists should act “as if”—that is, they should treat religious claims as true to better understand the religious experience. This strategy encourages an experimental closeness of the anthropologist to the subject phenomenon while keeping in mind that it is still a play, a pretending.¹⁰ The fourth strategy, methodological theism, asks anthropologists to come as close as possible to the research participants. Religious claims about truth are experienced

6 See, for example, Hocart, 1970; Lewis, 1971; Taussig, 1980; Turner, 1968.

7 Bielo, 2015: 29–44.

8 Berger, 1967: 100.

9 Evans-Pritchard, 1965. The term “methodological agnosticism” was coined by Ninian Smart (1973) in contrast to Berger’s term “methodological atheism.” However, these concepts had already existed in anthropological practice before the coining of these terms.

10 The term was coined by Andres Droogers (1996).

as truth as part of ethnographic work. This final strategy challenges a core principle of the social sciences: the reliance on empirical data.¹¹

In my research I used the stance of methodological agnosticism, which is, in my understanding, the prevailing position in most recent ethnographies concerned with religious life. In my research, I set aside the ontological question about the existence of the divine, instead trying to understand the worldview of the villagers and the meaning they give to the deities' movements, decisions, and communication with their followers. This understanding is reflected in my descriptions; for example, when I discuss the movements of Chalda, I mention that Chalda moves from one village to another rather than describing how it is actually the villagers that move him (or his palanquin).

It seems that most anthropologists who study religion practice methodological agnosticism and not methodological theism. However, one of my main goals in this book is to demonstrate that the gap between the anthropologist's point of view and that of the research subjects, at least regarding religious truth claims, is smaller than scholars tend to realize. I attempt to bridge these two points of view by referring to two main points.

The first point is directly related to the question of the agency of the gods. Does Mahasu, and other local gods, have the capacity to act and even make a difference in the world? That is, does Mahasu have agency? At least the subjects of this study, like the anthropologists who study them, emphasize the dominant role of humans in the decisions of the gods. In other words, the agency of the gods is perceived in a complex manner by (at least my) research participants.

Second, I point out that while anthropologists deal in ontological dilemmas about the existence of the gods (Do they really exist? If not, how should we treat them in the research?), Mahasu's believers face epistemological dilemmas: How can they be sure they are really conversing with Mahasu (or other deities) through mediums? By examining the question of the agency of the gods and the ontological/epistemological issues, I argue that the gap between local conceptions of divinity and the perceptions of anthropologists is narrower than we think.

Apart from addressing these theoretical questions, this book is also an ethnographic monograph regarding Mahasu and his followers. I therefore include many details that do not necessarily connect directly to these theoretical questions. During fieldwork I became aware that some of his followers, especially the younger generation, possess only limited knowledge

11 Perhaps the most famous case for this strategy is the work of Edith Turner (1992, 1996).

about Mahasu. In this book, I have therefore aimed to document a cultural phenomenon that is in the process of change for the reference of future generations. It is one addition to the growing number of ethnographies documenting the *devi-devta* culture in the early twenty-first century.¹² When writing the book, I wrote for the scholar interested in theoretical issues and the villager interested in his own culture, but I also wrote for the educated reader. I have therefore tried to write about Mahasu fluently and to avoid jargon and an academic writing style as much as possible.

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12 See, for example Halperin, 2019 and Ohri, 2019.

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