



DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
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**IS IT GOD SPEAKING?
IDENTITY AND AGENCY OF DEITIES IN
THE WESTERN HIMALAYA**

A talk by

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In many ethnographies, deities reflect social structures, represent power relations, or serve as a resource for individuals. However, believers usually do not doubt the existence of deities and their agency: that is, their ability act and initiate change. The gap between these points of view narrows in the religious experiences in the Indian Himalayas. There, the local population, who communicate with local deities via mediums, face an epistemological problem: how to be certain that they are, indeed, talking with their gods. Furthermore, the believers are aware that they play a role in the decisions of the gods. These two aspects of the religious experience are expressed in the gradual transition of the gods from a Pahārī to a pan-Hindu identity, an indication of the way in which the agency of the gods is being challenged and is subject to negotiation by the locals.

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Is it God Speaking? Identity and Agency of Deities in the Western Himalaya

by

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The Western Himalayas, for long, have intrigued many a researcher into the depths of an ancient yet growing polytheistic religion of Hinduism. The locals, or the '*Paharis*' of these hills, in their diurnal struggles, expectations, and worldly pursuits, embody, most intrinsically, the agency and will of their deities. Deities who have evolved with the people and live with the people; who sometimes flee to other valleys or remain dormant for ages. Deities who identify themselves through the people and vice versa.

It is from the intimate accounts of these people that Dr. Asaf Sharabi, asks, "Is it God Speaking?" in his talk hosted at the seminar hall of the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, on the 6th of September.

Asaf Sharabi is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Behavioural Sciences, Peres Academic Center, Israel. He obtained his doctorate in social anthropology in 2010 from Bar Ilan University's Sociology and Anthropology Department, where in his thesis he explored the encounter between religion and contemporary modernity.

Dr. Sharabi in 2013, undertook an ethnographic study in the Western Himalayas, a study in which he is intermittently engaged to this day. His field of study border two Indian states – Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. His research focuses on the religious experience and changing theological perceptions relating to the image of local gods, and in particular on the various ways in which religious streams are formed (and consolidated) in the face of other social and cultural phenomena, such as modern perceptions of religiosity or the rationalisation of reality.

Dr. Sharabi takes these themes further as he explores the 'Identity and Agency of the Deities in Western Himalaya'. In many ethnographies, deities reflect social structures, represent power relations or serve as a resource for individuals. However, believers usually do not doubt the existence of deities and the agency. The locals who communicate with local deities via mediums, face an epistemological problem of how to be certain that they are, indeed talking with their gods. On the contrary, the believers are aware that they play a role in the decisions of the gods themselves. This dichotomy of religious experience is expressed in the gradual transition of the gods from a Pahari to a pan-Hindu identity; an indication of the way in which the agency of the gods is being challenged and is subject to negotiation by the locals. The 'ontological dilemma', nevertheless, strikes the anthropologist, says Sharabi, as the scholar's mind contemplates the role of action and agency in reproducing religious existence.

The study characterises the Western Himalayas with mediumship, i.e. employing intermediaries in the interaction with god, as well as the presence of god-kings or '*Devtas*' as rulers. Dr. Sharabi posits that specific to the region under study, four *Mahasu* brothers namely, Botha, Basik, Pabasi,

and Chalda, personify rulership. It's expressed in various forms of which a) moving in space (on account of *pratistha*, special needs, or mere routine), b) appearance as kings with associated adornment (including flags, etc.) c) administration encompassing varying post holders and roles such as Wajir (Head), Pujari (Priest), Bhandari (President), Thani (Assistant Priest), Mali (Medium), Bajgi (Musician), and lastly, d) their judicial authority over land disputes amongst many others, require special mention.

Tracing the transition of the deity status from a Pahari identity to that of a pan-Hindu, over the course of 15 years, Dr. Sharabi draws attention to certain features. Against the characteristic wandering nature of their *Pahari* identity, he claims, the *devtas* have now become more grounded in terms of the physical establishment of *mandirs*. The said *mandirs* are further being progressively identified with either Shiva or Vishnu, as evident in the case of the Pabasi mandir's newfound recognition as "Maha Shiv Mandir." Additionally, the increasing adoption of an omnipresent stance and vegetarianism by the *devtas*, not only underlines their transition to a pan-Hindu identity but also brings to the fore, the presumed "impurity" of mediums in the guise of their non-vegetarian and alcoholic nature for which they're highly criticised.

Moving on, in an attempt to identify the causes underlying the aforementioned changes, in particular while simultaneously addressing the larger perspective of judging the possibility of merging the emic (god's agency) and etic (people's agency) views, Dr. Sharabi makes two significant arguments. While the first deals with the natives' epistemological dilemma, as opposed to the anthropologist's ontological dilemma, with the help of the practice of *gatti*, the latter aims to determine the locals' influence on the *devta's* decisions, if at all.

The practice of *gatti*, according to Dr. Sharabi, forms the centre stage of the encounter between the *mali* (medium) and the villagers. By means of controlled performance, the *mali* is believed to 'transform' into *Mahasu* (*devta*) who speaks, however, in the voice of the former. Meanwhile, the villages secretly prepare small heaps of rice which could either signify a problem or its lack thereof with the underlying assumption that *devtas* intuitively know all combinations. The *mali*, now *devta*, is asked to correctly pick a heap that corresponds to their issue, and sometimes, also declare the same, the failure of which leads one to question the agency of *devta* as an epistemological problem, i.e. whether or not they're actually speaking to the *devta*. Further, the problem intensifies when the discrepancy in the *gatti* results is viewed in the light of the *Mahasu* making fun of either the villager or the *mali*, or when the latter justifies the wrong choice of *gatti* by translating it to the absence of any presumed curse/problem.

In accordance to the second objective, Dr. Sharabi employs the instance of the roaming pattern of Calda, the youngest *Mahasu* brother with the largest territory, to exemplify the extent of people's influence on the *devtas'* decisions. While acknowledging the socio-political role of the local deities, he tries to underline the source of such authority by registering the villagers' opinion. Some thought that Calda 'Maharaj' roamed about as per his own will, meanwhile others accorded it to tradition and sometimes, even situations. For some, the *wajir* decided the *devta's* trajectory and for the rest, it was entirely premised on public decision. The differing views, thus, constructively led Dr. Sharabi to adopt the perception of a distributed agency.

In consideration of the aforementioned observations, Dr. Sharabi opines that the gap between the emic and etic views is infact much smaller. Contextualised in the shift of identity from *Pahari* to pan-Hindu, the agency of god isn't just questioned by the anthropologists harbouring the ontological dilemma but also sometimes by the locals, afflicted with the epistemological dilemma, when the mediums' statements, also considered to be the words of the deity, do not positively align with their expectations during the practice of *gatti*. In the attempt of labelling the mediums as imposters and

rendering their mediumship inauthentic, he claims that the villagers too challenge the agency of god. Secondly, the perception of a distributed agency, as borrowed from Sax's work, significantly collides with the widespread local notion of the villagers' heavy influence on the god's decisions and by extension, on the social structure arising out of such religious experience.

Dr. Sharabi's exceptionally competent talk gifted the audience pacifying insights into the world of the Himalayan Deities and their worshippers. Thereby, a fruitful discussion followed. Students and scholars alike, asked relevant questions to Mr. Sharabi, to which he answered willfully: whether the locals in exceptional situations ever faced the ontological dilemma of God's existence themselves? Whether the changing tides of religious identities, with the influx of Pan-Hindu Culture, were conflictingly rampant or smooth in transition? How these unique cultural practices and rituals at a functional perspective provide the ultimate social order in the hills? Dr. Sharabi addressed in his responses the importance of public opinion and the dialectics of lived realities and the significance of attaining the balance of etic and emic viewpoints in decoding the mysterious religiosity of the *Paharis*.