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Asaf Sharabi
Peres Academic Center, asaf.sharabi@gmail.com

Hagar Shalev
University of Haifa

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From Ruler to Healer: Changes in Religious Experience in the Western Himalayas

Asaf Sharabi
Hagar Shalev

Research literature on the Western Himalayas emphasizes the theistic control of local deities. In the framework of this ruling system, described by the concepts of 'Little Kingdom' and 'government by deity', local deities functioned as gods and kings. They practice their royalty through a concrete divinity notion, aided by human mediums. In this article we will indicate the beginning of a conceptual change in the perception of a local deity named Mahāsū. Although Mahāsū is still perceived as a ruler, his role has become largely symbolic. We maintain that this illustrates how local theistic conceptions adapt to changes in the political and economic-technologic spheres as well as to the influence of pan-Hindu tradition.

Keywords: Western Himalaya, religion, modernity, Pahāḍī culture, Hinduism, anthropology of religion, Mahāsū devtā.

Introduction

Mahāsū devtā (deity) is the common name of four brothers who are considered to be gods-kings, according to the tradition prevailing in the Himalayas where gods, while functioning as rulers of small kingdoms, also have abstract ritual-religious importance. The joint kingdom of the Mahāsū brothers is divided among them so that each one has different territorial theistic control, and 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, in India. Like the Mahāsū brothers, some of the local/village deities in the Western Himalayas present a concrete notion of divinity: They move from one village to another by palanquins (*pālki*) (Berti 2009a, 2009b; Sutherland 2003, 2006); they talk to their followers through human medium (Bindi 2012; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009; Sax, 2004, 2009); they are considered to be actual kings (*rājā*) of their territories (*deś*) (Luchesi 2006; Sutherland 2003, 2006); and they can geographically spread their political and religion power in space with the help of signs (*niśān*) e.g., images, swords, maces, thrones (Sutherland 2004). This local notion of divinity can be contrasted to the Brahminic-Purāṇic tradition, where the perception of God is more abstract, has kind and pure elements,¹ and is sedentary (Fuller 1992: 89-90).

In the current article we aim to show how modern educational, economic and technological developments, and holistic theological unifying notions of Hinduism, have penetrated into the theistic regime of Mahāsū and thus changed the religious experience of his devotees in the socio-political, ritual and mythical narrative aspects. We present a number of changes that have taken place in the last seven to ten years in the territory of Mahāsū: (1) changes at the spatial level, in the wandering practices of Mahāsū and his control over space; (2) changes at the personality level, regarding the nature and behavior of each of the Mahāsū brothers; (3) changes at the concept of divinity level, regarding abstraction and concretization of the perception of divinity; (4) and changes at the ritual level, associated with the range between purity and impurity.

We maintain that these changes in social and ritual levels represent a change in the perception and the role of the *devtā*: the concept of Mahāsū as king still remains largely formal and symbolical, but it seems that at least in parts of the region under his control, Mahāsū is experienced and perceived more and more as an advisor-healer and a mediator in disputes.

Pahāḍī Culture and Local *Devtā*

Until recent times, many villages in the Western Himalayas were entirely isolated from the Indian plains. Subsequently, the culture and socio-political organization that developed in these hills were unique. According to Berreman (1964: 54) there are relatively few Pahāḍī ('of the mountains') castes, "none of whom are classed as Sudras or Vaisyas." Most of the population in this region is from the two dominant castes (Rajput and Brahmin), and known as Khas or Khasiya (Berreman 1963; Majumdar 1962). The minority belongs to the caste that used to be called Untouchable, Dom, Dalit or Harijan, and nowadays, Scheduled Castes or Tribal Castes. The intermediate strata contain groups such as carpenters, goldsmiths and musicians (Bhatt 2010: 76-82; Utter 2010: 58; Majumdar 1962: 67-68). They are also registered as Scheduled Castes.²

Religion plays a vital role in Pahāḍī society. At the center of religious life are the local/village deities, known as *devtā* or *deota*. Some of these *devtā* relate to one village or more, and their followers connect to each other at the kinship level or/and the regional level. Other *devtā* have more influence and magnitude, and they are regarded by their followers as kings (*rājā*) (Sax 2003). Hindu deities such as Indra or Rama can also be represented as kings—i.e. royal gods (Fuller 1992: 106). However, in Pahāḍī culture *devtā* can be regarded as kings in more concrete ways. The *devtā* have immediate relations with human rulers and human

followers. They hold theistic control over territory and people, and "have both civil and criminal authority" (Sax 2006b: 120). It is not a symbolic role of kings, but rather "a political construction of gods as rulers" (Sutherland 2006: 83). The *devtā* enact their (political) agency through ritual representation in a method of theistic rule that is locally called *devtā kā rāj* or 'government by deity' (Sutherland 2003). After their immigration into and seizure of power in a territory, they govern the people and places through signs (*nisān*) of theistic sovereignty, e.g., images, swords, maces, thrones, palanquins (Sutherland 2004). The *devtā* performs movements within their territories (*ghori*) on their palanquins and mark their sovereignty as kings (*rājā*) (Berti 2009a, 2009b; Sax 2006b; Sutherland 2003, 2006).

The immediate connection of the people with their king-god is effected through human mediums. The *devtās* can talk to the followers through these mediums, and help them with lack of prosperity, health, and justice. The *devtās* instruct their followers and solve their social conflicts, especially those related to territories and inheritance, and restore the peace. (Bindi 2012; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009; Fiol 2010; Sax 2004, 2009).

The Brahmanic-Puranic tradition, as seen in various texts, including the Purāṇas, is far from monolithic. This is why abstract and concrete qualities coexist among Brahmanic-Puranic deities.³ However, in this article we make anthropological, rather than textual/philological claims. By so doing, we are following the research of other Himalayan scholars who have highlighted the concrete aspects of local deities in the Himalaya (e.g. Berti 2009a, 2009b; Bhatt 2010; Bindi 2012; Fiol 2010; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009; Levens-tam 2013; Sax 2003, 2006b; Sutherland 2003, 2004, 2006).

Studies regarding local *devtā* in the Western Himalayas usually explain the theistic and political context of religion in the area by focusing on the identifications between the divine and the political dimension of the *devtā*. Sutherland (2003, 2006) demonstrates how the theoretical model of the "little kingdom"⁴ can be translated to suit the context of the local (Khas) society residing between the Tons and Sutlej Rivers, by highlighting the overlap between political and religious control in the area. Sax (2006b) stresses the importance of festivals and rituals in determining the territory of the "little kingdom" at both the village level and the regional level of theistic control. The importance of territory in the context of the *devtā*' ruling system can be seen also in the works of Berti (2009a, 2009b).

Other studies deal with the influence of pan-Hindu tradition and values on the local-Pahāḍī tradition and on modern related topics (such as the Indian states,

technology, etc) and values. Levenstam (2013) shows how the previously isolated village, where local secular and sacred authorities are intertwined, is being transformed by modernization and a closer connection to the rest of the Indian subcontinent. Sax (2006a) presents what he calls an “identity crisis” of a regional *devtā*, as some of the followers insist that his identity is a form of *Śiva*. Zoller (2007) claim that the main myth about Mahāsū (the immigration story) was apparently based on story patterns taken from the Mahābhārata with a twofold aim: to demonstrate that Mahāsū is the rightful successor of the Pāṇḍava, the five sons of Pandu from the Mahābhārata, and to demonstrate Brahmin superiority. Elmore (2005) examines the establishment of state control over the definition of religion, and how it reshapes the local deity tradition. Vidal (2006) shows how the local tradition of belief in ghosts (*bhūt*) and their ability to take revenge, transcends modern norms of criminal prohibition in Jubbal village. Halperin (2012) explores the negotiation between Haḍimbā followers and the external influence of pan-Indian and global paradigms.

Following these studies, we shall show how the theistic regime of Mahāsū and the religious experience of his devotees are influenced by technological, economic, modern innovations,⁵ and by the way hegemonic pan-Hindu notions of divinity are accepted and integrated into the epistemological conceptions prevailing in Mahāsū’s territory. These innovations include new roads and greater access to remote villages, a growing economy that allows people to travel, television sets in many homes, job opportunities outside the village, and more. Due to the limited scope of this article we cannot elaborate on each one and how it has contributed to the new role of the deity. Our findings are based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Shimla District of Himachal Pradesh and in the Dehradun and Uttarkashi Districts of Uttarakhand, during August-October 2013 and March-June 2014. We conducted dozens of semi-structured in-depth interviews with various people in the field. The age range of the interviewees was between 18 and 84, most of them men. Most of the interviews (approximately 80 percent) were conducted in Hindi, the others in English.

Presence in Space: Between Movement and Grounding

Theistic control of god-kings in the Western Himalaya is expressed through set patterns of movement within their territories (Sax 2000; Sutherland 2006). A central difference between these local gods and the gods of the pan-Hindu pantheon (such as *Śiva* or *Viṣṇu*), who receive visits from believers at their temples, is their mobility, with the *devtā* wandering around in their kingdoms just as human kings

once did. It seems that this movement helps them re-enact their religious and political control over the region. In Mahāsū’s case, since he had to be the *rājā-devtā* of several territories with varying political frameworks and different social and ethnic groups, this spatial movement was necessary to maintain and extend his power (Bhatt: 2010: 192). In addition, as the emperor of a large territory rather than a minor deity of a few villages (Sutherland 2003: 52), he had to face bigger challenges and also gained more opportunities to maintain his rule.

As four brothers bearing the same surname, Mahāsū, they present different patterns of movement in space. While Bhoṭā (literally ‘seated’) sits in Hanol, the religious center of the Mahāsū brothers’ kingdom, Bāṣik and Pabāsī each wander through his own territories: Bāṣik’s area is called *śāthī-bīl* and Pabāsī’s area is called *pāśī-bīl* (also *pāmsī*).

Geographically these areas are not hermetically confined, relying mainly on the Tons River as their central point of reference; so that *śāthī* is the geographical area south and east of the river, while *pāśī* is the geographical area north and west of the river. According to popular myth, when the territories were distributed among the brothers it was decided that Caldā (literally ‘moving’), the youngest brother, would roam over his brothers’ territorial spaces, so he spends twelve years wandering between villages of *śāthī-bīl* and twelve years wandering between villages of *pāśī-bīl*. Once every twelve years, during the transition from *pāśī* to *śāthī*, Caldā spends one night in Hanol, the seat of Bhoṭā.

Until a few years ago, Bāṣik regularly roamed between four villages—one year in each village. Pabāsī regularly roamed between three main villages—one year in each village, occasionally visiting other villages for a few days up to six months. The area in which Bāṣik and Pabāsī roamed was rather limited (i.e. small parts of *śāthī-bīl* and *pāśī-bīl*). They both circulated only in Uttarakhand, close to the religious center of Hanol. Bāṣik roamed in Tyuni Tehsil of Dehradun district and Pabāsī in Mori Tehsil of Uttarkashi district. They were both carried by a *pālki*, a palanquin resting on the shoulders of high caste (Brahmin and Rajput) members. They were accompanied by their *vazarat* (ministry personnel) which consists of two levels of hierarchy: at the administrative level, the strongest in terms of hierarchy, are Rajput and Brahmin individuals who fill the roles of the *wazīr* (ministers), *pūjarī/deopuzia* (priests), *mālī* (mediums), *thani* (priest assistants) and *bhaṇḍārī* (equipment keepers). At the second hierarchical level are *bajgi/dhakis* (drummers) and *kolta* (carriers) (Bhatt 2010: 183).

In recent years there has been a change in the motion of the two brothers. Pabāsī has remained in Thadiyar village

since 2003, and Bāṣik grounded himself in Maindrath in 2007. We have been told that both *devtā* intend to stay in these villages on a permanent basis. The stories and locations of these two villages are particularly interesting. It seems that they have been carefully selected as the ‘home base’ of the two brothers. Maindrath is a central village in local mythology. It was the seat of Hūṇa Bhat, the Brahmin who originally invited the four Mahāsū brothers to the area from Kashmir. Maindrath was also the first village where the Mahāsū brothers appeared in the form of golden images. Most importantly, Maindrath is located very near (about five kilometers, or three miles) to the religious center of Hanol. Thadiyar, the seat of Pabāsī, is perhaps the inverse of Maindrath. Until recently Thadiyar did not feature prominently in the Mahāsū belief system: none of its residents served as *wazīr*, *pūjarī* etc., nor was it part of Pabāsī’s route. The importance of Thadiyar is primarily due to its strategic location. Thadiyar is about three km distant from Hanol, located adjacent to the other bank of the Tons River. According to popular custom, the bridge adjacent to Thadiyar is the only bridge that Caldā crosses once every twelve years, when he moves between *pāsī* and *sāthī*.

Because of Thadiyar’s strategic location, in 2000 Caldā sought to establish a large temple there that would compete with the one in Hanol. This was the result of a dispute in Hanol over matters of control between *wazīr* and *pūjarī* of *pāsī* (representing Pabāsī) and those of *sāthī* (representing

Bāṣik).⁶ After the temple was completed in 2003, it became a permanent location for Pabāsī, while Caldā roamed in *pāsī*.

The grounding of Bāṣik and Pabāsī means that there are now three Mahāsū brothers—along with Bhoṭā—who remain in one place rather than roam, Bhoṭā in Hanol, Bāṣik in Maindrath and Pabāsī in Thadiyar. The three villages are very close to each other, adjacent to the Tons River. Only the youngest brother, Caldā, continues to wander around the territories of his brothers.

Two reasons can explain the grounding of Bāṣik and Pabāsī. First, the economic situation has affected the society. Umesh, a school teacher in Chiwan, explained:

That is a new ritual. Because of the terms of the economy [and] changes [in] society that people are busy. They cannot carry *devtā* from one place to another place, every one year [or] six months. Everybody is busy in their jobs.

When the *devtā* is moving, about 50 to 200 people must accompany him from one village to the next. As Umesh explained, nowadays people are busy and are reluctant to do it. Moreover, we were told that the *vazarat* of the two *devtā* concluded that it is better for the *devtā* to dwell close to the main road. In this way the devotee could easily visit the *devtā* and contribute money. Maindrath and Thadiyar are good choices for that purpose.⁷



Figure 1. The only bridge between *sāthī* and *pāsī* that Caldā crosses.

(Sharabi, 2013)

Another custom that has changed recently is Caldā's practice of wandering. According to Bhatt (2010: 188-189) over the past fifty years (1952-2000), Caldā traditionally passed through a precise set of villages in both *śāthī* and *pāśī* territories, spending between six months and two years in each. Indeed, interviewees from the family of the *wazīr* of *śāthī* in Bastil village confirmed this regular way of wandering. September 2013, during our fieldwork time, was the first year after Caldā had moved from *pāśī* to *śāthī*. As Bhatt (2010) describes in his cyclic tour, the village where Caldā stayed was indeed Koti. However, according to our informants, the list of places where Caldā has stayed for the last several years has changed and does not match Bhatt's list. Before moving to *śāthī* in December 2012, Caldā stayed in Saraji for the first time, remaining there for five years. He also stayed in Thadiyar a few years ago and in this village as well—for the first time. A new temple was constructed during his stay in both villages. Some informants (like the family of the *wazīr*) acknowledged the change in the wandering practice of Caldā. Others (like one of Caldā's *pūjārī*) explain this method of practice as suited to Caldā's personality. Caldā, we have been told, has an unexpected method of choosing his traveling rotation. He does not have a specific cycle but goes wherever he pleases and wherever he is invited.

Caldā's wanderings have also changed as regards to duration. According to both local myth and research, Caldā has a cyclic twelve years rotation in *śāthī* and in *pāśī* (Bhatt 2010: 185-188; Sutherland 2003: 52-52; Williams 1992 [1874]: 171-175). However, according to our informants, he has recently extended his stay in *pāśī*, remaining there for eighteen years, until December 2012. Apparently, he did so because the people in that region are more prosperous than those in *śāthī* (Ohri, quoted in Sharma 2011). Prior to that he stayed in *śāthī* for fourteen years instead of twelve. It would seem that Caldā is presently stationed where there is wealth. With Caldā staying put for a long while in *pāśī*, the people living in *śāthī* have begun to break out of their ritualistic patterns. According to Lokesh Ohri even the *bajgi*, a special caste of performers, are disappearing, which makes things difficult for the *devtā*'s traditional procession (Sharma 2011). Thus, modern changes and new economic patterns have affected Caldā's spatial roaming and contributed to a change in the religious experience of his followers.

These changes in the wandering practices of Bāṣik, Pabāsi, and Caldā, can be understood in the context of innovations in transportation and significant improvements in the socio-economic state of their followers that allow for greater mobility. It can also be related to pan-Hindu theological

influences where the *devtā* is stationary. More importantly, these changes challenge the *pahārī* method of travelling under the '*devtā kā rāj*' idiom.

Devtā's Nature: Differentiation of the Mahāsū Brothers

Writings on Mahāsū over the years did not always comment on their differences. Emerson (1930), Rose et al. (1919), Walton (1989 [1910]), and Williams (1992 [1874]) used Mahāsū, for the most part, as a generic name, without referring to a specific brother. Mahāsū was described in general terms as 'eccentric,' 'terrible,' 'crafty,' 'aggressor,' 'a great nuisance,' 'pernicious,' and similar descriptions.⁸ Researchers writing in the second half of the twentieth century make some distinction between Caldā Mahāsū and his brothers, but still lack a personal distinction between the four. Interviews conducted during this research revealed clear distinctions on the respective nature of the Mahāsū brothers, especially Bhoṭā and Caldā.⁹

According to a famous local myth, Bhoṭā injured his leg as he emerged from the ground in Maindrath, and he is characterized by a limp. This is why he remains in Hanol and does not wander between villages like his brothers. Bhoṭā was described as patient, careful, calm, sound, stable, and always willing to forgive and give people another chance (even those who committed *doṣ*). In the words of a young informant from Dhar village:

Bhoṭā is always sitting; he is very calm and patient. His power will come late. If you ask something from him, it can take a long time until it will happen. He thinks for a long time on each problem, and then only he will give an answer.

We have witness dozens of mediums events where Bhoṭā interacts with his devotees through his mediums. Bhoṭā's patience and prudence were demonstrated in these cases. An example is one of the medium events we saw in Jubbal. In one of our visits to the local temple we saw a local *mālī* (medium) in action. He was counseling two people—a young man in his twenties and an old woman. In this particular performance, Bhoṭā was advising the two devotees who sought help and advice through the body of the *mālī*. In an interview conducted a few hours later, the *mālī* described the two cases. Here is one of them:

The wife of the young man is going crazy. She is out of control. Some possession... she has something inside her. The *devtā* gave her rice, special rice. He needs to wait and see if anything gets better. His wife needs to tie it around her neck. They need to go back and tell Bhoṭā if it is any different after

some time. Bhoṭā told him he should also go to his village local *mata* (goddess) and offer her *prasād*, maybe *halwa*, he should then follow her advice, she [the *mata*] will help him. But he also needs to keep the rice.

The case described to us by this *mālī* demonstrates how careful Bhoṭā is. He does not magically cure or provide simple and clear solutions. He examines the issue and primarily advises by providing a solution that demands time and patience. The young man was required to return to Bhoṭā after a certain period and describe the changes (if any) regarding the problem, so he could consider further treatment. Although this procedure is fairly common in the region, it is consistent with other descriptions and examples regarding Bhoṭā's relaxed and calm temper as opposed that of his young brother Caldā.

Prudence, equanimity and patience are the qualities that make Bhoṭā the favorite and probably the foremost brother. His prominent status is reflected not only in the many temples built in his honor, but also symbolically by the fact that he is the brother who sits in Hanol. We were constantly told by interviewees that if they have a small problem (either medical, or a disagreement with others) they go to the local temple, but for a big problem they go to Hanol.

Caldā's characteristics differ from those of Bhoṭā. Caldā was formerly somewhat demonic (Emerson 1930; Rose et al., 1919; Williams 1992 [1874]). He was described as blackmailing, threatening and aggressive, traits commonly associated with local demons rather than with local gods. During our fieldwork we did not encounter these characteristics. The interviews revealed that Caldā, while remaining the 'wildest' brother, has undergone a process of refinement, and is generally described as being positive by nature.

A main theme repeatedly voiced by interviewees was that Caldā is unexpected; it is impossible to predict his next move. This is mainly manifested in his spatial movement; today he is here, tomorrow he is there. As we were told by a young man from Koti: "He may decide, in one minute, to move from one village to another village." It seems that his frequent and unexpected spatial movement increases Caldā's popularity among the people. A forty-year-old high caste man from Jubbal said:

Caldā helps poor people, because he moves everywhere and meets all kinds of people. All *davṭā* help the poor, but he is accessible, he can do whatever he wants. Sometimes he punishes, for he has no patience with someone who is trying to break the rules, but he can help immediately.

Another description of his unexpected spatial movement was heard in Sundli village:

Caldā sometimes travels at night; he decides suddenly that he wants to go somewhere. Even if it somewhere that his brothers don't go to or stay in. He would never refuse an invitation from a low caste person, he goes where he is needed.

Thus we see that Caldā is perceived as a savior of the masses, the poor and the low castes. In some cases he even enters their homes. In both quotes the connection between his spatial movement (accessibility, unexpected movement) and the help he extends to believers is regardless of their economic condition or caste. This is very unusual given that until recently (2007) (Bhatt 2010: 217-218), strikes meant to enforce entry restrictions into Mahāsū temples were common, even for people who are not considered Dalit.¹⁰

Caldā's unexpected nature can be vividly seen through the experiences of Sunar, one of our informants. The first time we visited Caldā the trip took longer than expected and by the time we reached the village where he stayed it was raining and night was falling. Preferring not to walk in the rain and darkness we postponed our meeting. A few days later we managed to see Caldā in daylight without Sunar. As a result, Sunar believed that Caldā did not wish to see him, since this was the third time in three weeks he had tried unsuccessfully to meet him: "The old people would say Caldā doesn't want to meet me right now, not yet. He is playing like that. You cannot choose when to see him, he will choose for you. Caldā has his own ideas; he does what he wants."

Most of the interviewees emphasized that although all the brothers are equal, Caldā is different since he has special powers (*viśeṣ śakti*), which several interviewees described as "tantric." Almost everyone agreed that Caldā has excessive, magical powers, which he uses wisely. His unpredictable decisions and the unexpected use of his magical power tend to foster positive reactions among his devotees. Thus, whenever Caldā's power was discussed, people tended to smile and laugh. Caldā was often described as a mischievous magic maker and not a threat. While Bhoṭā weighs his actions and does not immediately perform magic, Caldā is very different, as described in Jubbal by someone in the local roadside restaurant: "When he arrives miracles happen. For example, the crop improves, and people get good jobs."

As regards the nature of Bāṣik and Pabāsī, due to the limited scope of this article, it can only be said at this point that they are distinct in character and features both from the

other two brothers and from each other. Nowadays Pabāsī is more frequently regarded as an ascetic figure, using marijuana and following a vegetarian lifestyle. He is explicitly designated as a form of Śiva. He is considered inviolate and smart, and has a close relationship with Caldā, the only other brother who also travels in *paśī*. Bāṣik is described by most informants as the eldest brother. As such, he is relaxed, balanced, and patient, and he gives very good advice to his followers.

We argue that the power and continual domination of Mahāsū are made possible by this differentiation, which provides a dual concept of divinity for its followers. Mahāsū may thus resemble the gods of the pan-Hindu pantheon, which remain in one place (Bhoṭā), while simultaneously acting as moving god-kings after the manner of the Pahāḍī religion (Caldā). The growing importance of Bhoṭā as the main Mahāsū indicates the importance of the pan-Hindu tradition.

Divinity Notions: Between Concrete and Abstract

The widespread notion of divinity in the Western Himalayas is directly connected with concrete notions of divinity such as the status of the God-king who wanders in his territory and can talk to his followers (Sax 2000; Bindi, 2012; Sutherland 2006; Vidal 2006; Berti 2009a, 2009b). One of the most important aspects of the specific change in the notion of divinity we found in our fieldwork is the intensification of an abstract attitude toward *devtās* as part of an Advaitic that perceives God (Brahman - transcendent self, cosmic existence) as omnipotent and omnipresent, in individuals' souls as well (Ātman -the human soul, true self) (Torella 2011: 109).

For example, when trying to ascertain exactly where the different Mahāsū brothers live today, we were told that in fact Mahāsū is everywhere, but mostly in Hanol. A drummer of Pabāsī in Thadiyar village, Ajay Das, said: “This is how it is in all India. There is more than one *mūrti* (image). So you can say Mahāsū is mostly in Hanol, but he is everywhere.” The drummer was trying to explain this idea of abstraction of the *devtā* by connecting it with the way he believes God is perceived all over India.

Another example was recorded in Sundli village while talking to a Brahmin family with connections to the political-economic elite of the Mahāsū temple in Hanol. When asked where they live, the oldest son, Mahesh, replied: “The big God is lord Śiva. He is everywhere. The little parts are four Mahāsū. Mahāsū is one part of Śiva, he is spread like that.” We replied: “But where is Pabāsī right now? People told us he is in Thadiyar?” Then he answered:

The people who tell you that Pabāsī is in Thadiyar and Bāṣik is in Maindrath don't understand the meaning of God. How can that be? The temple in Thadiyar is only seven years old, but the *devtā* is much older, he is eternal [...] the human mind needs to take their things and worship them. They give them the power.

From his answer it is clear that he understands the *devtā* as an abstract, eternal, all-pervading and omnipresent power rather than a divine human. He also connects his perception of the divine with Śiva—a deity of the classical Hindu pantheon, reflecting an agreement regarding the concept of ‘God’ among members of both high castes (the Brahmin Mahesh) and low castes (the drummer Ajay Das).

We heard another reference to this subject from Caldā's Mahāsū current *pūjarī*, who told us that the Mahāsūs “nature [character = *svabhāv*] is a little bit different, but their essence [*sār*] is the same.” A similar Advaitic idea was heard in Dhar village from Bhoṭā's temple *pūjarī*. We asked him about the different powers (*śakti*) of the brothers: “Someone told us that Bhoṭā is powerful, that he has more *śakti* - what do you think?” After gazing at the wall for some time he said:

In the whole universe *there is only one power*. It is the same power in every religion, no different. From this power there are branches. Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva. They manifest this one power, but it is the same power, only one. It is like a tree and its roots. The universe is the tree, its root are in the ground. They are the power. But the branches are seen from outside. We can see them.

His answer is in line with the Advaitic notion of divinity and the political-theological idea of ‘unity in diversity’ that has become the popular conception of modern India. He aspires to see his own belief and way of life as correlating with pan-Hindu belief and Western ideas regarding divinity. This is why he repeatedly emphasized that there is only one power [*sirf ek śakti hai*]. To him, our question seems to miss the basic idea about God and life—there is only one God and his power is manifested in all living and non-living beings.

The transition from concrete to abstract perceptions of divinity is also evident in the direct presence or appearance of the *mūrti* in everyday life. According to information culled from the fieldwork, the number of times Mahāsū's image is taken out of the temple and the number of people who participate in this ritual is decreasing. The actual possibility of encountering the *devtā*'s image is important for generating a concrete notion of divinity, and is linked

with the important pan-Indian manifestation of religious worship through direct sight (*darśan*) (Eck 1986: 44).¹¹ For example, in Sirthi village, the *devtā* remains inside the temple all year long. His *nisān* is taken out several times a year, primarily for *rātri-pūja*.¹² The *devtā* is only seen once a year on the first day of Jāgra (yearly festival) and only by the priestly staff (*pūjarī*, *thani*, and *bhaṇḍārīs*).

The ongoing discourse about the necessity of a *devtā*'s medium clearly demonstrates the dispute regarding the *devtā*'s place in peoples' lives and in their religious experience. It is commonly asserted, and confirmed by our experience in the field, that young people (between 20-30) are beginning to challenge traditional beliefs in the credibility of the *mālī*. Although it is hard to determine to what extent these voices actually represent a major overall change, it is clear that today they are present in Mahāsū's territory, especially in the Jubbal area. A thirty-year-old educated man in Dhar told us that everything that is corrupt in Mahāsū's system today is related to the *mālī*:

Nobody can see *devtā*, so people need to trust the *mālī*. [...] if someone has a problem like money, or a job or health condition, they will think it is related to *devtā*, so many times they have to believe [the] *mālī* [...] they never speak the truth. Everybody can pretend, like an act or a show. How can we trust that without proof? [The] *mālī* told me I will get a certain job—and then it didn't happen. *Mālī* told me that someone who is about to die will get better and an hour later he died. So how can we trust him?

This young man represented the opinion that mediumism is a fraud.¹³ This opinion does not challenge the *devtā* himself, his power or his symbols; it only rejects the transformation of divine power through a human mediator. It is not a secular voice, but rather a voice searching for a more abstract expression of divinity, which views the *devtā* as a distant element to be accessed through prayer and ritual, and not through direct conversation.

Another aspect reflective of changes in notions of divinity is the dominance of Śaiva ascetic elements. That is not to say that Mahāsū is suddenly considered to be Śiva, nor that by attributing to the deity Śaiva titles Mahāsū changes his essence and functions as a local *devtā*, but to point out that in some places the identification with Śiva is becoming clearer and more explicitly connected to a Brahmanic perspective. To anchor this argument, we should look at the Pabāsī temple in Thadiyar. A new Caldā temple was consecrated in Thadiyar on June 6th, 2003. Caldā decided to build this temple for himself but later he decided to continue wandering and gave this temple to Pabāsī (Bhatt 2010:195). After it was declared Pabāsī's, the temple underwent significant changes that identify Pabāsī with Śiva. For example, when approaching the temple, the sign in the front entrance says: 'Mahā Śiv Mandir.' Nandī (Śiva's cow) looks over the view and Śiva's *triśul* is also there.

Our main informant in Thadiyar, Lokesh, mentioned that Mahāsū is definitely a manifestation of Maha Śiv: "Pabāsī is like Śiv, he also takes marijuana and he has Nandī. His *mālī* needs to take marijuana to be under his influence. So



Figure 2. The new temple at Thadiyar. The sign in the front entrance says: 'Mahā Śiv Mandir.'

(Sharabi, 2013)



Figure 3. Nandī near the new temple at Thadiyar.

(Sharabi, 2013)

he is a part of Lord Śiv.” Thus, it is clear that when the new temple was constructed, the political administrative center of Mahāsū’s cult found ways to identify it with the renouncer tradition. Identifying Pabāsī with the ascetic tradition of Brahmanism is also seen through the repeatedly mentioned statement that he is vegetarian and therefore doesn’t accept *bali* (sacrifice). It seems that Thadiyar set the tone, because since 2012 at least two more villages in the area of Pabāsī territory, Khashdahr and Chiwan, built Nandi in their temples.

During our fieldwork we found another development connecting Mahāsū to pan-Hindu tradition - the identification of Mahāsū with Viṣṇu. A few of our informants put forward a new idea, regarding Mahāsū as some kind of Raghunātha or Rāmacandra (Rama)—two of Viṣṇu’s ten Avatars. We also detected new statues of Hanuman in two temples: in the Villages of Raigi and Kashdahr. In Raigi there is a large temple of Ṣeḍkuliā, one of Mahāsū’s *bir* (divine soldiers), and we have been told that Ṣeḍkuliā is manifestation of Hanuman. The Mahāsū brothers were characterized more specifically by one of our interviewees in Raigi: “Caldā Mahāsū is Avatar (rebirth) of Ram. Pabāsī is Avatar of Lakṣmaṇ (Rāma’s twin brother in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*). Bhoṭā Mahāsū is Avatar of Śatrughna (youngest brother of Rama) and Bāṣik Mahāsū is Avatar of Bharat (second brother of Rama).”

All these developments show how divinity perspectives are slowly becoming more Sanskritic and linked to Advaitic

monistic divinity tenets. The growing influence of pan-Hindu ideas and economic, educational and theological renovations over the past decade are contributing to this change.

Rituals

As part of the common Himalayan system of *devtā kā rāj*, religious worship entails offering *devtās* goats, sheep, and rams (*‘bali-prathā’*). The offerings are meant to please the deity and are aimed at either receiving something in return or simply as an expression of loyalty (*śradhā*). However, in the territories of the Mahāsū brothers there is constant change in the acceptance of *bali* on the part of the *devtā*. Mahāsū’s *devtā* have stopped eating meat, having become vegetarian. To use Sāṃkhya terminology, the *pūjā* is becoming more sattvic in nature and less tamasic, the food of the *devtā* is becoming more ‘purified’ in accordance with Brahmanistic criteria. Thus, pan-Hindu notions of divinity—where vegetarianism is considered Sanskritic and essentially ‘better’—are penetrating local society through the influence of a popular religious movement (the *Satsang* of the Radha-Swami cult)¹⁴ and gradually changing Pahārī concepts of divinity and their related religious experience.

In 2006 *bali-prathā* was banned from the main temple in Hanol. To understand the significance of this change, let us note an event that occurred in 2001. In Khasdhar village (one of the places Caldā Mahāsū visits during his years in *pāsī*) a celebration (*yajñya*) was held in honor of Mahāsū.

Some 3,000 sheep were slaughtered during the festival to satisfy the *devtā*. People gathered from thirty-five surrounding villages, bringing sheep and their own local *devtā* (Tribune News Service 2001). Although this occurred before 2006, it points to a religious conceptual change in Mahāsū's community, insofar as 3,000 sheep were offered to the deity a mere five years prior to the banning of *bali* in Hanol.

Although *bali* was banned in Hanol, it is still customary to offer *bali* outside the temple. This also holds true for other parts of Mahāsū's territory. As an old *pūjari* and musician in Sundli village noted: “[Bhotā] Mahāsū does not like the sight of blood [...] this is why they sometimes offer the *bali* outside. Otherwise it will cause misfortune [*doṣ*] for them.” This is supported by evidence from the Hāṭkoṭi area as well as from Jubbal. Exposed to pan-Hindu influences, western ideas of development and modern theological notions espousing orthodox Brahmanism, Mahāsū's community cannot remain unaffected and consequently offers a mediatory solution by allowing the ritual to continue in a limited form.

The ambivalence toward the *bali* system can be vividly seen in the dilemma of a Rajput couple in Sirthi village. The couple tried to have children for many years without success. Being educated and relatively well off, they endured many expensive fertility treatments in Shimla. After almost losing hope they turned to Mahāsū for help. When we met them they had two children. We were invited for a special *rātri-pūja* the night after Jāgara (annual festival). The next day they offered *bali* in return for the *devtā*'s help with their fertility problems and held a celebration for the whole village. Food (both vegetarian and non-vegetarian) was offered and everyone sat together for a big meal. The wife was vegetarian. We were curious about their offering of a goat and asked them how they felt about the slaughter. Confused and embarrassed, they smiled and looked at the floor as they answered, talking together:

You see there is a struggle because of the *bali-prathā*. There are the Radha-swamis and gurus - they don't believe in the system of *bali-prathā*... they belong to Satsang... you see in the villages there are many people who don't believe in it, but we have to do it. We don't want to, but we have to... this is our tradition.

We asked how many people in the nearby villages are vegetarians and they replied together: the husband said 20 percent and his wife 40 percent. This story highlights the tension surrounding the changing of ritual customs. While being exposed to the pan-Hindu notion of purity and *āhimsa*, Mahāsū's community is slowly changing its concepts of divinity or what it considers to be 'proper' religious

behavior, applying the human actions of its followers (who are vegetarian) to the deity. Saying that “they have to” offer *bali* despite being vegetarian points to the strength of *pahāḍī* tradition in Mahāsū's territory.

Another reference to the change in *bali* practice, we heard from a young Brahmin who tried to explain why until his grandfather's generation, everyone in the area ate and sacrificed animals:

People now understand that all Mahāsū can't be happy if something is getting killed for them. They used to eat only sheep. They raised only sheep and goats. What else can they eat? What can they give to [the] *devtā*? Today we have apples to sell; we have everything we want to eat. People start to understand that now. But it takes time before it will disappear. Brahmins like us do not eat goat and sheep, but other people do.

In his words he makes a connection between the food of the people and the food of gods. His message is that the power of tradition is very strong. He rationalizes the changing eating habits with the penetration of economical means that facilitate a theological change in notions of divinity.

An interesting theological solution was offered by the people to resolve their ambivalence toward the *bali* system. This solution places the *devtā bir* (divine soldier)¹⁵ in a mediatory category. In order to avoid offering an 'impure,' non-Sanskritic oblation for Mahāsū, they continue to do so, but to Mahāsū's *bir* rather than to the main deity (and sometimes also for Caldā Mahāsū himself). This solution preserves Pahārī ritualistic traditions while at the same time bringing it under the umbrella of Brahmanist epistemological lines of thought. The role of the *bir* as a mediatory category can be seen as a concept that brings the deity and its 'holiness' closer to human experience, another way to connect the rational with the numinous (Trans and Harvey 1950 [1917]). An example to this theological solution comes from a conversation with Mahāsū's guru-jī,¹⁶ a local Nāth shopkeeper living in Hanol. He said that the *bali* could never be for Mahāsū, only for his *bir*:

There are three types of *bir*. Tamsic *bir* take *bali*. Sattvic *bir* do not need anything like that to be happy. *Bali* can be *bakrā* [goat] or *kaddu* [young goat]—but this is only for tamsic *bir*. Sattvic [*bir*] will take *halwa* [dense sweet], rajasic will take *chatni* [sauce], cashew, peanuts and such...but only the *bir* will take *bali*. Mahāsū is a god—he is pure in mind so he has to be sattvic. Tamasic *bir* like Rang-Bir, Jang-Bir and Uddam-Bir—they can take [*bali*].

This example highlights the penetration not only of the different items used for ritual, but also of the use of theological terms taken from the Brahminic-Purāṇic tradition. It is also important to note that it differentiates Mahāsū from the normative *rājā-devtā* concept, since it identifies him with sattvic (Brahmanist) notions and distinguishes him from the rajasic aspect of the ‘Kṣatriya-devtā,’ the warrior-king.

The harshest criticism heard against the act of slaughtering animals was in Dhar village, expressed by the local Bhoṭā and Santopya *pūjarī* and his son, a well-educated historian living mainly in Shimla. When the *pūjarī* came from Rohru area to Dhar he banished the *bali*-system from the village. He believes it to be the worst aspect of the system today:

The people of the new generation do not believe in sacrificing, because you don't need to sacrifice an animal or a person for personal use, how can it satisfy the *devtā*? He is not cruel, he is merciful and kind. The system is corrupt and abusive, it takes the people's property and uses their belief [...] Before, people were uneducated and that's why they had the *bali* system [...] education influences the awareness, times are changing, this is why the young people don't accept the old system, *it brings them to backwardness*.

In another conversation he said:

When Caldā was here they sacrificed goats and young goats. They did it five times a day. This creates bad atmosphere and bad energies. Death comes inside the place. Wherever there is *bali* things can't work right. I am not judging anybody's diet, but in a religious place, where someone goes to *devtā* to ask something—killing is not ok.

From his perspective, fostering modern (as opposed to traditional) ideas that regard animal sacrifice as antiquated and undeveloped is the key to getting rid of the old, corrupt system. He connects the *bali* system with backwardness. This fact emphasizes the encounter between local traditions and what seems to be regarded as ‘modern’ education. It highlights the fact that the outside influences that challenge the traditional way of life are indeed both pan-Hindu and a modern development.

Another ritual that has undergone religious changes in the last ten years is the Jāgra, the annual festival and most important holiday of Mahāsū, which literally means: staying awake all night. This public ritual has lost some of its importance and centrality in Mahāsū's community, both in

his religious center—Hanol and Maindrath Valley, and in the peripheral zones of Jubbal and Rohru. Due to the limited scope of this article we can briefly mention only some of the changes. The decrease in the importance of the ritual is clearly seen in the decline of participants, the reduced time dedicated to its celebration, the need for Mahāsū to ‘force’ people to observe the ritual, the physical absence of the *mūrti*, and the lack of ritual actions associated with Pahāri tradition (e.g., *bali*, possession).

These changes in the *bali* system and in the Jāgra are linked partly to pan-Hindu tendencies and partly to the modern ideas and habits that make up daily life. The dividing line between the two is hard to establish, since, for example, it is impossible to determine whether *bali* was banned because of the Satsang's activity in the area (and its propagation of *āhimsa*) or whether it was due to the penetration of modern western ideas that connect animal sacrifice with backwardness. The community itself offers both explanations when speaking about the decline of tradition.

Conclusion

The main assertion of this article is that a gradual change in the notion of divinity, influenced by both pan-Hindu tenets and technological and economic development, can be seen in Mahāsū's territory. This change is manifested in the changing roles of Mahāsū, who is increasingly perceived as an advisor, a judge and a healer and less as a Rājā ruling over a kingdom. We presented these changes on four different levels: spatial control, differentiation between the natures of the deity-brothers, conceptualization of divinity, and the level of rituals.

At the spatial level we can see the slow fading of the ‘*devtā kā rāj*’ method of rule. Mahāsū's control has become limited to a smaller spatial region, as two of the four brothers have ceased to travel between villages and (along with the third brother, Bhoṭā) are now fixed in one place. This new situation mimics the ‘orthodox’ deities in the plains, who are visited by devotees in search of solutions to medical or financial problems. Even the traveling brother, Caldā, is perceived nowadays as a magician *devtā* rather than a ruler.

At the level of the character of the *devtā*, we see that the three older brothers tend to be calm and patient and are thus sought after as advisors in times of distress. Unsurprisingly, Bhoṭā, who is the most beloved of the Mahāsū brothers, is especially renowned as for his advice, and the majority of Mahāsū temples belong to this deity, whose measured behavior proves better suited to followers of the cult nowadays. Caldā's personality has also undergone a

change. He is no longer perceived as an aggressive *devtā* and his method of action is less aggressive than it used to be.

The third section looked at prevailing notions of divinity notion in Mahāsū's realm, which have become less concrete and more abstract in accordance with the Advaitic epistemology, which casts the *devtā* as a single omnipotent power. This new construction of divinity was manifested through the monistic idea of an omnipresent unity with different manifestations in the shape of Mahāsū. It was also seen in the idea that man facilitates the power of *devtā*. As man is less exposed to the *mūrti*, his notion of the *devtā* is becoming more abstract. It is also seen in the formation of a discourse regarding the necessity of mediums (*mālī*) and the growing identification of Pabāsī with the renouncer tradition and with the vegetarian yogic aspect of Śiva. Finally, a new understanding of Mahāsū as connected to Viṣṇu has been presented by some of the locals. All these developments show that divinity perspectives are slowly becoming linked to Advaitic divinity tenets. As a result of these theological ideas Mahāsū is experienced as another form of God (*īśvara*) rather than an actual ruler in the manner of '*devtā kā rāj*'.

Finally, the ritual changes described here relate to the new perception of divinity as an abstract concept. We showed how increased vegetarianism among Mahāsū's followers reflects back on the deity and consequently on the local society's identity. Thus, *bali* was recently banned from Hanol temple and other local temples. The *bir* of Mahāsū, as a mediatory category, facilitate the continuance of local tradition without affecting Mahāsū's prestige. By relinquishing traditional rituals (i.e., the decline in *bali* and *Jāgra*) Mahāsū's function as a king decreases and becomes more symbolic, related to health and family issues.

Although Mahāsū may preserve the title *rājā* or *mahārāj*, he symbolically retains his role as a king, becoming an abstract rather than an actual governing ruler. In some villages, like Mandhol, Mahāsū has even lost a symbolic role. Two of the locals—an 84-year-old man and one of his grandsons—denied any royal feature of Mahāsū. As the younger man said to us: "He is not a ruler, he is a healer."

Asaf Sharabi is a senior lecturer of Anthropology at Peres Academic Center. His research focuses upon the intersections of religion and modernity in the Hinduism context and in the Jewish context.

Hagar Shalev is a Ph.D. student in Indian Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her research interests are Himalayan religions/ traditions, roots of Yoga, Yogic philosophy, and Haṭha Yoga research.

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Endnotes

1. An important distinction between popular traditions and the Brahmanical tradition is that of purity and impurity. Impure customs include meat-eating, animal sacrifice and alcohol consumption. Pure elements include ghee, milk, coconut, lamps, and rice (Fuller 1992: 86-87).
2. According to Berreman (1960) only 10 percent are from the lower castes. The 2011 Indian census indicates that in most of Mahāsū territory less than one third of the population is considered to be scheduled castes or tribal castes. One prominent exception is tyuni tehsil, where more than 80 percent registered as scheduled castes or tribal castes.
3. For example, some gods are described as being constantly on the move.
4. His theory is based on the idea of the 'little kingdom' that was first presented by Bernard Cohen in a study of villages near Varanasi (Cohen 1962: 483).
5. In addition, these changes are not a 'new' development but rather continue the trend towards increasing development on a diachronic axis. Furthermore, these innovations cannot be separated or measured, since they were observed by the locals even while they were speaking about their fading traditions.
6. This dispute was over the fact that Mahāsū's bank account was only controlled by *śātī's wazīr* (Bhatt 2010: 380).
7. In some other versions told to us in the field, it was the decision of the *devtās* themselves and the *wazarat* obeyed.

8. It is highly possible that Caldā is the 'original' Mahāsū, since Williams (1992, [1874]: 171-175), based on Major Young's data from the year 1827, describes him as a wandering *devtā* in a cyclic twelve years of roaming. He shares his Hanol Temple "with another mysterious divinity, who always remains stationary" (1992 [1874]: 172). The division of four Mahāsū brothers already appears in Atkinson's (1973 [1882]: 836) descriptions. It seems that during the forty year gap between the collected information the perception emerged of Bhotā Mahāsū as the stationary brother and the other three as travelers.

9. This distinction was even more obvious at the ritual level, when we consider the people behind ritual transformations such as mediums, *pūjaris*, temple administrators, palanquin-bearers and drummers. Due to the scope of this paper it can only be mentioned that the representatives of Caldā are themselves more connected to the 'old' local rituals.

10. See for example an incident in which a low caste woman was beaten upon entering the temple in Hanol, as recently as May 2010: <<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2010/20100525/dplus.htm>>.

11. Having said that, it is also important to remember that in the Western Himalaya one can also meet the *devtā* through his medium and connect to him through *pūja* and the *pūjari* himself.

12. A time when the *devtā's nīśān* is a special guest at a family house (if the family is low caste he does not come into the house but sleeps outside in a tent).

13. For more about the authenticity of mediums see 'God of Justice' (Sax 2009).

14. Radha Soami Satsang Beas is a philosophical organization based on the spiritual teachings and dedicated to a process of inner development under the guidance of a spiritual teacher. RSSB was established in India in 1891 and gradually began spreading to other countries. The philosophy teaches a personal path of spiritual development which includes a vegetarian diet, abstinence from intoxicants, a moral way of life, and the practice of daily meditation (RSSB 2014).

15. Almost every local *devtā*, like Mahāsū, has many *bir* who are subordinate to the local *devtā*. The *bir* are spiritual entities like the *devtā*, but they are considered to be lower in the spiritual hierarchy of deities. Some *bir* are more important than others, and there are small local temples in their honor in the villages.

16. Bhotā Mahāsū has a human adviser (*guru*) who assists him with important decisions. This role is transferred by lineage (*paramprā* system) from father to son. According to

our fieldwork it also exists in the Kotkhai area with regard to *devta* Baidra and in the Hāṭkoṭi area with regard to Banar Devta.

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