

## **God of Justice: Ritual healing and social justice in the Central Himalayas**

by William S. Sax

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Reviewed by Arik Moran

William Sax's book is an in-depth exploration of ritual culture in the Central Himalayas that focuses on the cult of Bhairav in Chamoli District of upper Garhwal (Uttarkhand, India). The uniqueness of the cult is largely determined by its composition, which is primarily but not exclusively made up of untouchable castes. Sax thus departs from his earlier studies of Brahmins and Kshatriyas in Garhwal, and complements them with a view from outside 'normative' society. This also allows for addressing the central ethnological question of the place of Harijan culture and religion within Hinduism (p. 7). As the book's numerous case studies demonstrate, untouchable religious culture in Garhwal does indeed share broad similarities with orthodox Hinduism (e.g., the parallels between local and orthodox Hindu rituals; pp. 68-69), and in some instances it even converges with that of higher castes (e.g. a Kshatriya serving as oracle to the Harijan god; pp. 103-107).

Sax describes the evolution of his interest in and eventual study of Harijan religious culture as one of gradual awareness, from an initial obliviousness to the modest shrines of Bhairav through an erroneous identification of the Garhwali deity with the Sanskrit Bhairava until finally embarking on a detailed ethnographic analysis that culminated in this book. Along the way, Sax also refined his understanding of what conducting ethnographic research is all about, affording us a rare view of the trials and pitfalls of fieldwork. As an 'exponent of ethnography' (p. 4), Sax devotes his introduction to addressing critiques of the discipline in recent decades through colourful personal accounts of his initial encounters with ritual specialists. Ethnography is defined as 'the method of long-term participant observation that is central to the discipline of ethnology', which 'has something special to contribute to the understanding of particular cultures, and thereby of human beings

generally' (p. 4), and its critique from postmodern-epistemological and postcolonial-moral quarters is carefully addressed. Commencing with the epistemological critique that it is impossible to arrive at objective scientific knowledge since phenomena are necessarily mediated by language, Sax reposts by opting for a highly reflexive mode of writing that highlights the ethnographer's 'prejudices and predispositions ... [and] the ways in which the data were gathered and the text constructed', thereby acknowledging the limitations and partial nature of the researcher's analyses (p. 5). This also partly answers the criticism levelled by postcolonial-moral scholarship, which faults ethnography for exoticising the 'Other' through an 'immoral' emphasis on cultural difference. Sax rightly dismisses this as untenable insofar as the study of any field requires an object of study, and the ostensible 'ethical dilemmas' deriving from the ethnographer's position as an outsider to his field of study are more straightforwardly located in 'economic and political asymmetries' than in the realm of culture (p. 20).

Next, Sax presents the history of the cult of Bhairav on the basis of local memory, oral history and oral texts (p. 27). We thus learn of Bhairav's eastern provenance, his predominant role as saviour of the oppressed (pp. 32-37), and his multifarious representations, of which possession is judged to be the 'most persuasive and powerful ... more compelling than any iconographic description and more immediate than any story'. Rolling on the ground, 'writhing in pain, their hand twisted into the shape of a bird-like claw' (p. 45, as well as cover photo), the possessed enact the suffering of Bhairav and, by extension, that of his Harijan followers (p. 47). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *hexis*, Sax explains that Harijans in Garhwal, despite enjoying greater freedom than their counterparts in the plains (most notably the right to own land), have nonetheless internalised their inferior status and stigmatisation through bodily and social practices (pp. 25-26). The display of *hexis* through ritual is further elaborated with an enquiry into the performative aspects of possession. In the cult of Bhairav, possession is qualified as performance since it comprises musical sessions that are judged by participatory audiences. Referencing John Austin's notion of the speech act, Sax notes that the utterances pronounced during possession are not 'purely performative' but rather contingent on 'antecedent social conditions' (p. 47); in the present case, the powerful position of gurus in Garhwali society as the ritual specialists

who command gods and spirits. Accordingly, the physical manifestation of possession constitutes an embedded (and not linguistic) act, in which the contorted body of the possessed reflects the suffering of Kachiya (the most commonly venerated form of Bhairav among the Harijans) and his followers (pp. 48-49). Performativity thus defines caste by social rules that facilitate the Harijan *hexis*, which is learned, mimetic and inscribed in ritual practice, strengthening Sax's longstanding thesis that 'public rituals are the sites par excellence where identities and relationships are created, re-affirmed, reiterated, and sometimes reconfigured' (p. 49).

Sax then goes on to explore the links between landscape, memory and ritual. This seeming flight from a purely social relations-based description of ritual is justified by local definitions of place in terms of human history and action (p. 90). This approach is congruent with Edward Casey's privileging of 'place' over 'space' as the site where meaning is created through dwelling, embodiment and movement, granting Garhwali 'public and ritual representation of "palatial" relations' an authority that is both representative and constitutive of those subsisting between ritual participants (pp. 52-53). The use of rice grains from the client's crops in oracular consultations is a case in point. The grains (landscape) are handed over to the oracle who uses them to read and diagnose the client's condition. The oracle then leads the ritual through dialogue, helping the client 'to remember' the factors that may have contributed to his present plight, effectively composing 'a plausible story that will explain the cause of his suffering' (p. 56). The same chapter usefully provides detailed descriptions of the key rituals associated with the cult that are frequently referenced in the various case studies presented in the book. These include the preparatory *kas* ritual, the ritual for establishing a shrine (*than ki puja*), and the *chhal puja*, a highly popular ritual for exorcising crafty demons (pp. 65-73, 73-77 and 83-90, respectively). The means by which the cult spreads are then explicated and highlight the relationship of kinship, residence and ritual: the path of aggression sees shrines established in order to counter curses (but see notes on chapter 7, below); the path of the land (*dharti*) denotes cases in which migrating families maintain extant shrines insofar as these are the residences of divine beings; finally, the path of the outmarrying daughter (*dhyani*) underlines the persistent links between recently married brides and the Bhairav of their natal home (*mait*) in their new abodes (*saurya*) (pp. 77-83).

The question of agency among ritual specialists is broached in the fourth chapter. Noting the conflation of 'agency' with 'resistance' in scholarly research during the 1980-1990s (primarily among postcolonial-moral critics), Sax wrests the term from its misinterpretation as 'free will' and consequent opposition with 'structure' by broadening the discussion to agency's natural counterpart, 'patience' (p. 93). In the cult of Bhairav, the gurus who command gods and spirits are marked agents, while the oracles, the vehicles of possession, are qualified as patients. Patience is illustrated in three fascinating case studies (pp. 95-107), in which oracles make futile attempts to avoid possession by gods. The gurus, on the other hand, undergo elaborate Tantric initiations, most notably by spending a night in a cremation ground, where they make offerings to the Masan and his minions. These test the gurus' courage and, ultimately, grant them power over the spirit world (pp. 107-132). Significantly, both parties' 'reputation and success' relies on the degree to which they are believed to embody (in the case of oracles) or control the gods and/or other supernatural beings (in the case of gurus) (p. 95). This ultimately means that 'healing agency is always distributed in networks' consisting of oracles, gurus and the beings with whom they interact (p. 133).

The focus on multiple agents is expounded upon in the remainder of the book, which explores social aspects of the cult. First, Sax focuses on family unity, which is presented as a ritual, therapeutic and moral principle (p. 136). In identifying and analysing the different strands of this 'principle', Sax takes issue with the broader world of anthropological theories concerning South Asian (Hindu) society. He thus partly agrees with the Dumontian claim that the category of the 'individual' is alien to Indian society, and highlights the Marriott circle's promulgation of the 'dividual' as the fundamental unit of the Hindu social imagination, which relates persons to broader wholes/groups (usually caste, in this case, the family). Informing the dividual's identification with a larger social body are 'broad cultural assumptions', such as 'the idea that people's natures are continually altered through transaction of substance', especially as regards sex and food (p. 138). This last point is particularly pertinent in Garhwal and recurs in almost all of the case studies presented, which faithfully capture the fluidity and sense of peril underlying séance sessions (for a particularly lucid example, where a client vainly attempts to avoid explicitly asking for a curse to be cast upon his relatives, see pp.

146-151). The 'clear and consistent moral pressure for particular persons to subordinate their wills to those of the family' exhibited throughout these case studies thus highlights the function of ritual as a means for constituting and reinforcing the principle of family unity, and also seem to support the claim that "individualism" [in India] is a problem to be solved, not a goal to be pursued' (pp. 163-164).

The sixth chapter extends the investigation of family unity to the realm of the dead. Caught midway (*ardhagati*) between this world and the next, the ghosts of the departed are ritually appeased in order to be transformed from ambivalent and potentially harmful ancestors (*bhatakaya*) to benevolent ones (*pitrakaya*) that are safely distanced from the world of the living (pp. 165-166). The connection between exorcisms and family unity is clearly brought out in the words of a guru, who explained that 'ghosts come into existence when the body is abandoned but the person's thoughts (*kalpanaem*) remain' (p. 179). It is precisely this lingering in proximity to the living that renders ghosts ambivalent, their presence a source of anxiety that exists alongside the positive sentiments harboured by their living relations. This ambivalence is further captured in the mode of exorcism, which consists of singing tender, loving songs to the accompaniment of 'irritating' beatings on metal utensils (p. 178). The guru's task is to lead the ghost from its intermediate state to the realm of the dead by forcing it to present itself (by cutting 'yama's net' above the head of the person possessed by the ghost), identifying its unfulfilled wishes and securing its relations' promise to work towards their achievement. Only then can the ghost be transported (in the form of a small silver image) to the high-altitude lake of Nara Kund near Badrinath, from where it ultimately parts for Lake Manasarovar in West Tibet (p. 173). As in rituals of family unity, exorcisms aim to re-establish healthy relations within the family by 'clearly dividing the living from the auspicious ancestral dead' and are thus also therapeutic (p. 195).

Ambivalence is not, however, the sole prerogative of ghosts, but also found among ritual participants, who are often suspect of instrumentality (as one oracle put it, 'god on the lips but a knife at the hips', p. 163; see pp. 139-146, for the case study in question). This leads to a discussion of the fundamental question regarding the 'realness' of possession. The problem is situated in the context of the debates sparked by Ioan Lewis's study of the Zar cult in Sudan (1971), which centred on the 'idea that so-called

peripheral possession cults were a means for relatively powerless people to express their dissatisfaction and/or to obtain a measure of power and authority' (p. 196). This debate, Sax argues, was largely occluded by the distinctly modern framing of religion in terms of belief instead of practice. If, however, possession is seen as a form of what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'strategic practice', its underlying logic becomes apparent: similar to dinner invitations in Europe and cross-cousin marriages among the Kabyle, possession proves to be fundamentally grounded in misrecognition (*meconnaissance*). The possessed thus dissociates the expediency of practice from the underlying principles of ritual, which enables him to 'consciously subscribe to ideas about possession, participate in exorcism rituals, and even feel himself to be possessed, while still behaving "strategically" by utilizing the ritual for his own purposes' (p. 198).

The last chapter explores the highly contentious topic of ritual aggression. Because of its contradiction with the principle of family unity, the casting of curses or 'sending the god back' is invariably construed as a defensive—and therefore moral and legitimate—act (pp. 201-202). Distinctions are drawn between longstanding grudges that assume the form of a curse (*hamkar*) and deliberate acts of aggression (*ghat*) by the desperate. As with the 'instrumentally possessed', the curser's actions are legitimized by misrecognition: the person casting the curse customarily offers himself as sacrifice to Kachiya should he be found at fault, and only then does he ask the deity to punish his opponent, thereby convincing 'oneself of the justice of one's position, and the legitimacy-and even morality-of the curse' (p. 202). The case studies presented (pp. 202-230) are, to say the least, disturbing, and have to do with rape, suicide and quarrels over land. These dramas (or, rather, tragedies) find their solution in the customary path of reconciliation, 'when the rival parties come together to worship the god; that is, when the family is reunited' (p. 203).

The book concludes with a postscript on ritual, healing and modernity (as well as its Garhwali synonym, 'development'). Modernity, it is argued, is characterised by a distinctly suspicious stance towards ritual, which is negatively judged in terms of efficacy. Proponents of modernity/development perceive rituals to be thoroughly grounded in superstition and, because they have no palpable outcome, they are dismissed as 'inefficient' and thus intrinsically linked with the 'underdeveloped' or 'primitive' world. Accordingly, the educated and economically advanced

classes deem ritual healing through possession to be ‘backwards’ (pp. 236-237). However, the preponderance and persistence of ritual healing in Garhwal, as well as in the West, suggests it meets certain needs that are left unfulfilled by modern medicine. For Sax, these are epitomised by modern medicine’s compartmentalisation of problems, which fails to address the holistic—in this case social—aspects of healing. For, while modern medicine may cure a disease, ritual healing may restore the wellbeing of the individual, while also tending to ‘social and interpersonal relationships’ (p. 242). The utility of ritual efficacy thus becomes secondary, as rites are no longer perceived as hiding deeper meanings that require the deciphering skills of intellectual researchers, but as techniques that subscribe to context-specific logics (p. 238). The healing practices associated with the cult of Bhairav fulfil this description, in which ritual practice is primarily aimed at the betterment of the ‘social field’, rather than the body or psyche of the patient.

Lucidly written and carefully grounded in theory, *God of Justice* makes a significant contribution to the ethnography of Garhwal that will benefit social, cultural and medical anthropologists, as well as regional specialists in general. Sax’s rich experience, engaging prose and candid reflections quickly draw the reader into the mysterious, dangerous and often conflicted world of untouchable religion in practice, while reminding us of the persistent importance of rigorous ethnographic research long after the waves of critique of the 1980-1990s have subsided.