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JASSAL, AFTAB SINGH. 2024. *Gods in the World: Placemaking and Healing in the Himalayas*. Religion, Culture, and Public Life. New York: Columbia University Press. 244 pp., ISBN 978-0-231-21497-1 (paper).

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Aftab S. Jassal's *Gods in the World* is a finely crafted ethnography of Uttarakhand at the juncture where neoliberal development converges with a resurgent Hindu nationalist agenda. Jassal conducted much of the fieldwork in 2011 amid state-sponsored initiatives that marshal economic, scientific, and bureaucratic resources to reconfigure local temples and deities. Jassal shows how the insertion of Danda Nagaraj as a "fifth abode" on a time-honored pilgrimage circuit exemplifies the instrumentalization of sacred space for broader political ends. This mobilization seeks to establish a narrowly sanctioned mode of divine engagement — one mediated exclusively through Brahminical ritual authority and formal *darshan* in consecrated precincts.

Yet such official narratives occlude the plurality of devotional life. Jassal identifies two critical shortcomings of the Hindu nationalist enterprise: its underlying bias against Muslim and Dalit communities, and its insistence on a unitary ontology of the divine that privileges textual, temple-bound practice. In contrast, Uttarakhand's communities experience their deities through richly localized modalities such as oral traditions, embodied performances, and ritual forms that often elude state-backed priestly hierarchies. By collaborating with *jagari* gurus, Dalit ritual specialists who mediate village deities across caste boundaries, Jassal charts these peripheral sacred spaces to reveal fault lines between state-sanctioned and vernacular ways of knowing.

The result is a richly textured portrayal of human-divine relations that attends to their affective, moral, and political dimensions. Jassal shows how deities can unsettle village

governance, repair the ruptures wrought by patrilocal displacements, and enable communities to restore balance through embodied rituals. Being chosen to speak for a deity may bring affliction, but when guided well, it can also bring healing. These deities also voice communal suffering and may even contest newer regional deities. Portrayed as immanent and transcendent, they permeate the very fabric of social life. *Gods in the World* thus deepens our understanding of Himalayan religious practices while also demanding a reassessment of religious sovereignty amid competing claims to truth and authority.

Jassal foregrounds placemaking — the processes by which people produce, negotiate, and inhabit meaningful locales. In his conception, place is not a static backdrop but an ephemeral, dynamic domain of social action co-created by deities, humans, speech, movement, and material objects. He contends that placemaking serves as a vital technology of healing, reshaping social reality. Within this cosmos, deities offer, choose, or impose their presence upon places and persons, to which humans respond by “surrendering” their agency. Even when a deity is invoked via an oracle for ritual healing, that invocation itself emerges from circumstances deemed divinely motivated. Consequently, Uttarakhand reveals an asymmetrical, deity-governed world in which deities wield greater power than humans.

Jassal’s study advances scholarship on Himalayan religious practices and placemaking in two significant ways. First, by centering village deities and their placemaking rituals, he reveals the processes through which deities manifest, engage with, and exert authority over social life. Second, drawing on theories of embodiment, he demonstrates that placemaking operates through possession: the body becomes a site of negotiation, where inviting a divinity operates a space for human-divine interaction, and anchoring that divinity “in place” sets boundaries that calibrate its benefits and dangers. He further shows that deities’ power travels via human hosts and material artefacts, rendering somatic religious practices both central and pervasive. As an analytic category, placemaking thus reveals how diverse religious narratives and practices intersect, producing an epistemological map of religious traditions that sharply contrasts with the Puranic order maintained by caste-privileged temple priests.

In Chapter 1, Jassal draws on the Garhwali orature, particularly the *gaths*, or ritual songs of jagar ceremonies, to trace a genealogy through which village deities enter social life. He maps these deities’ connections to both Puranic gods and local rulers. He shows how this nexus informs devotees’ understanding of two pivotal shrines in the Garhwal region: Sem

Mukhem and Danda Nagaraj (28). The latter temple has recently been incorporated into a pilgrimage circuit harnessed by Hindutva nationalists. Consequently, in this chapter, the author illustrates the collision of two distinct epistemologies and ontologies of human-divine relations. Jassal demonstrates how Puranic and Garhwali religious forms intersect, and he highlights embodiment as an organising principle in local cosmology, even when elite Brahmin priests at these temples fail to recognise its centrality.

In Chapter 2, Jassal illustrates that *dosh*, which is the continuum of affliction and healing, is understood by jagar mediums as a constellation of interlocking disturbances—psychophysical, social, and environmental—that affects humans and non-humans alike. This encounter is metaphorically likened to a “hooked thorn of jujube tree,” which pierces and adheres to divine and human actors. Dosh arises from the arrogance of deities or humans, or from the harm done to a serpent, and thereby spreads like a contagion, attaching itself to people, creatures, objects and places (66, 73). Yet these afflictions also open a space within the body for the deity, prompting negotiation of its presence along with attendant ideologies, ritual forms, and subjectivities. As Jassal observes, “affliction and healing are not seen to constitute an oppositional binary; rather, they are recursive, iterative movements in a process of relational and existential transformation” (23). Throughout this account, he emphasises the body’s special status as the medium capable of stabilising the deity’s dwelling.

In Chapter 3, Jassal examines the *panno* ritual, in which village deities—functioning as political divinities—engage their “constituents” through dramatised episodes of the Mahabharat. Performed by Dalit mediums, this dance-possession ceremony serves as a forum for deities and villagers across caste lines to express their demands and grievances. Although in Jassal’s account, a particular *panno* ultimately reinscribes caste hierarchies and imposes an extra levy on landless Dalits, it nonetheless created a fleeting space in which the marginalised could present complaints directly to both the gods and the village’s landed elite (5).

In Chapter 4, Jassal presents the case of ghost affliction among married women, showing how these disturbances mirror the physical, emotional, and relational upheavals produced by patrilocal marriage (101). He observes that women “theorised afflictions, including ghost affliction, not as exceptional but rather as coextensive with the gendered struggles and difficulties of everyday life and marriage” (117).

In Chapter 5, he turns to oral histories of Dalit oracles and priests, who occupy a paradoxical position: as valued priests and healers, they embody religious authority, yet they themselves remain members of caste-oppressed communities (128). These narratives trace how Dalit ritual specialists, skilled oracles, healers, and musicians come to their vocation in a quest for belonging, learning to listen when the gods call them home and endowing their lives with purpose. Their stories underscore both human agency and the reciprocal bonds between the divine and practitioners, revealing how these connections foster fulfilment and healing for religious practitioners (127).

In Chapter 6, Jassal traces the ritual procession of village deities, guided by *jagar* priests, to their “uncle’s” shrine at the Jhakar Saim. This expedition reveals a mythological geography: an embodied, intensely local sense of place that transcends modern administrative boundaries (159). Here, an ontology distinct from the Puranic traditions emerges. For the pilgrims, bathing in the village spring to encounter the divine eclipses the mere visual encounter within temple precincts (170). In the Epilogue, Jassal introduces the concept of *manana*, which is to acknowledge, honour, and respect, as a more meaningful term than 'belief', suggesting that religion is a relational inner, lived reality rather than an abstract proposition.

Each chapter stands as an independent exploration within its own thematic terrain, yet together they map a cohesive vision. Jassal guides us through a diverse array of religious lifeworlds while quietly articulating his unique approach to the anthropology of religion, body, and place. The intellectual toolkit he assembles invites readers to recognize the religious across varied spheres and layers of social existence. Three pressing issues are catalogued in the book but remain undeveloped analytically: 1. the polyvalent nature of the Garhwali narrative and ritual complex; 2. the position of landowning Garhwali villagers vis-a-vis Puranic and Hindutva versions of Hindu traditions; and 3. The agency of humans in divine-human relationships.

Although Jassal richly documents origin myths, his later chapters sometimes suggest that the Garhwali orature is monolithic. He begins his book by meticulously cataloguing variations in Garhwal’s origin myths but then abandons this pluralizing approach, implicitly portraying orature as uniform. Although his emphasis on orature enriches our understanding of Hindu practice, the absence of divergent voices within this normative framework risks reducing orature to a static artefact. Preserving its multiplicity requires attention to how ordinary

people engage with these narratives in a discordant manner. In the Preface to *Listening to the Heron's Words* (1994), Raheja and Gold integrate Subaltern Studies into ethnographic practice, shifting from archives to field inquiry to reveal ruptures in discursive fields and emphasise that subaltern perspectives are neither fixed nor singular. Rather than recovering one definitive subaltern voice, they urge us to “recognise the discontinuity, the interpretation of the hegemonic subversive, and their varied deployments, from moment to moment in everyday lives” (16). By adopting this approach, ethnographers can ensure that orature remains a vibrant and contested site of meaning.

Turning from Jassal’s analysis of broad regional myths to his gendered case studies, we see where his framework succeeds and where it falters. In chapter 4, Jassal observes that Garhwali Hinduism has retained its autonomous nature, which makes the practice both potent and enduring. Yet he leaves unexplored how different social actors draw on these narrative resources. In his discussion of newly married women’s possession rituals within a patrilocal system, he clearly distinguishes between how men and women interpret the ritual. This inclusion of diverse voices is commendable, but it raises the question of whether the women are only associated with the ritual in a normative, unilateral manner.

Ethnographies across rural South Asia reveal that both married and unmarried women appropriate religious narratives and practices to enrich their lives. Raheja and Gold show in rural Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan that women’s defiance of husbands—and even young wives’ adulterous behavior—can be locally valorized (xvi-xxii), and that normative traditions themselves carve out sanctioned spaces for resistance, as seen in married women’s varied deployment of veiling in North India (xxiii). Thus, religious practices serve not only as a collective practice but as a resource individuals mobilize to forge unique realities. Raheja and Gold’s work implies that Jassal’s study of possession rituals may likewise harbor resistant potentials beyond his framework. Although broader political cultures have shifted since Raheja and Gold’s fieldwork, traditions now face pressure toward uniformity; Jassal demonstrates that possession-based practices have nonetheless endured in Garhwal. It is therefore reasonable to surmise that these rituals may have preserved their inherently plural character. Moreover, by situating himself primarily among the priestly class, Jassal remains insulated from the perspective of possessed women and those at the margins of the patrilocal marriage system. Their absence reinforces a portrayal of Garhwali Hinduism as prescriptive and monolithic rather than dynamic and contested.

Second, the issue of religious authority resurfaces in the final chapter when a Dalit pilgrim confronts a caste-privileged priest, insisting that in Garhwal ritual status cannot be bought. Although this challenge targets a caste-privileged priest, it also echoes the broader influence of Hindutva-driven religious culture. In the pilgrim's view, traditional high-caste customs have become entwined with development-backed Hindutva agendas. Although the Dalit pilgrim conflates high-caste village customs with Hindutva agendas. Yet, Jassal reminds us in Chapter 1 that Puranic and Hindutva forms of Hindu traditions remain distinct from Garhwali practices, which are rooted in bodily possessions. This contrast raises pivotal questions: How do Garhwali elites, whose authority derives from possession rituals, now engage with Puranic and Hindutva forms of devotion? Do these registers clash or coexist on their own terms? And ultimately, who defines religious authority in Garhwal, and by what means?

Jassal vividly demonstrates how deities intervene in human social worlds, exerting moral force while also legitimizing individual actions. In Garhwal, village deities are regarded not merely as figures of dependence but as the very source of communal strength. This prompts a critical question: Does a deity's moral force adapt to each devotee's circumstances? Jassal addresses this question in part by tracing shifts in divine influence across locales but stops short of examining variation by social position and individual will. Although he frames affliction and healing as iterative, cyclical processes, he leaves unresolved whether deities themselves rely on human agency to sustain their presence. Do devotees ever contest or render a deity obsolete? Under what conditions do individuals navigate competing divine discourses? Moreover, if deities so actively engage in a world marked by entrenched caste and class divisions and wield considerable, disproportionate power, one must ask: what hierarchies exist among the deities themselves? In other words, what is the deities' caste?

For the contemporary anthropologist of South Asia, the greatest challenge is to eschew perennialism, just as historians must guard against presentism. No single ethnographic account can address every critical issue; yet Jassal's book raises many of them, testifying to its remarkable ambition. I invite Jassal to treat these questions as catalysts for further research and scholarly dialogue.

## REFERENCES

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