

Research Paper

## The Living Gods Among Us: Psychological Perception of Gods in Devbhoomi

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### ABSTRACT

Religious beliefs have been seen in a condescending light by scientific purview for a long time. However, it is crucial to look at them from a psycho-social point of view, emphasizing upon their importance and functionality in everyday life. From developing a moral and ethical value system, to offering psychological comfort and emotional resilience - religious beliefs have various roles in Indian societies. The present explorative study offers an insight into the psychological perception of local gods and religious practices in the Devbhoomi land of Uttarakhand. Through semi-structured interviews, themes of resilience, comfort, belongingness and hope emerged from people's beliefs in religious practices and local deities. Strong traditional values carried over generations and geographies influence people of Devbhoomi to the present day.

**Keywords:** *Religious beliefs, resilience, faith, emotional comfort, social values*

In the mystical landscape of Uttarakhand, known as *Devbhoomi* or the "Land of Gods," deities aren't distant figures but active forces in daily life, shaping emotions, values, and community bonds. A unique and profound relationship exists between local communities and their deities. This bond reflects not only deep-rooted religious beliefs but also a complex psychological framework that shapes the individual and collective psyche of the people.

The present study investigates the psychological perception of gods in Devbhoomi, discussing how this belief shapes one's mental process, social approach, and emotional living. In doing so, the key concern was to identify how people come to believe in and internalize these native gods in such a way that their own personal conception of notions like justice, morality, protection, and personal identity are shaped. This explorative study involves examining variables such as cultural beliefs, individual mental health, and social support systems through the lens of the local pantheon of gods and goddesses, each associated with specific virtues, powers, and moral codes. They emerge in everyday life as living persons in justice, health, and prosperity. Through such interactions people have about their gods, one could come to a better view of how these figures have acted as psychological archetypes that satisfied different emotional and psychological needs in the community.

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## The Living Gods Among Us: Psychological Perception of Gods in Devbhoomi

Even seen from a psychoanalytic lens, local gods exist as parental figures who offer the voice of *superego* for individuals - guiding them through the moral and ethical mud-waters of everyday living.

This topic was chosen because of the psychological richness of these beliefs. The Gods in Devbhoomi are never distant or symbolic but living, close-to-personal entities involved in everyday life. For instance, Golu Devta, who is often called the "God of Justice," has a strong form of worship because people believe that he can settle wrongs and recreate a moral balance between persons in society. The psychological roles as perceived by these Gods can unveil how individuals manage their personal and social stress, solve conflicts, and build identity in the light of a belief system culturally embedded.

The rationale behind this research was to find out the role these Gods play in meeting cultural and holistic psychological needs, such as the need for justice, protection, or a sense of belonging. Through this, we can gain insight into how collective religious beliefs meet personal psychological needs in a world where institutional support systems are not always readily available or accessible. This topic stems from the interface of psychology, sociology, and religious studies, particularly at how faith-based frameworks may be seen as informal systems of mental and emotional support within communities.

Having a personal connection with the region of Devbhoomi allows one of the researchers of the paper to develop a positionality which brings together her sincerity and dedication for the research area. This inspires the motive of the paper as well, which is knowing how local religious perceptions support mental health, social harmony, and individual resilience can help light up the psychological benefits of spiritual and religious frameworks in other regions and cultures too. This research will thus assist the researchers in establishing a psychologically oriented understanding of how the belief in deities encourages personal resilience as well as community harmony and a feeling of moral justice in Devbhoomi.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Panwar (2017) studied the folk religion of Uttarakhand's Kumaon and Garhwal regions, with a particular emphasis on how indigenous deities like Golu Devta, Bhairava, and Nanda Devi were incorporated into mainstream Hinduism. Golu Devta, worshipped mainly in Kumaon, is the God of Justice. Devotees submit written petitions at his temples seeking justice. He is linked to Bhairava, a fierce form of Shiva. Narsingh, an avatar of Vishnu, is popular in Garhwal and is associated with local Rajputs. His dual forms—benevolent and fierce—reflect both protective and violent aspects and draws attention to the significance of oral traditions, oracular practices, and rituals like *Jagar* which literally means 'staying awake' in maintaining local religious identity. Rituals like *Jagar* help preserve local religious identity and provide psychological support by offering a sense of control in uncertain times. These practices foster community bonds, shape individual identities, and give emotional relief where legal systems may be lacking. The study also showed how regional deities maintained cultural significance while being absorbed into the Brahmanical pantheon, reflecting the interplay of caste, gender, and religion. It highlighted how these traditions shape both the social and mental life of Himalayan communities. The paper traced the historical and cultural evolution of religious practices in these regions, highlighting the shift from early Buddhist influences to the dominance of Shaivism and Shaktism. It also emphasized the blending of local and pan-Indian traditions, where local gods are gradually assimilated into the Brahmanical pantheon, such as Bhairava being identified with Shiva and Nar Singh with Vishnu. Additionally, it explored the social, political, and caste dimensions of folk religion,

showing how local traditions both reflect and shape the socio-cultural life of the Himalayan communities.

Kumar (2023) studied the "Lore, Legends, and Landscape of Uttarakhand exploring the Socio-Religious Significance of Golu Devta" which focused on the mythology of Golu Devta, a central figure in Uttarakhand, revered as the God of Justice. It examined how his legend evolved over time across Kumaon and Garhwal, emphasizing the role of oral traditions in preserving his story. According to local lore, Golu Devta was a prince wronged by his stepmothers but survived and later became a symbol of justice. His followers believe in his power to rectify wrongs, and petitions for justice are submitted at his temples, particularly at Chittai and Ghoda Khal, often accompanied by brass bells. Psychologically, worshipping Golu Devta offers people a sense of control and hope, especially in situations where formal legal systems may feel inaccessible. The act of submitting petitions and offerings serves as a psychological release, helping individuals manage stress and anxiety. The belief in divine justice provides emotional comfort and reinforces a shared moral framework within the community, fostering trust in a higher order and promoting mental well-being. Through these rituals, devotees feel a sense of empowerment, contributing to both individual and communal resilience. By submitting petitions and offerings, devotees feel a sense of agency, control, and reassurance, which is particularly significant in rural areas where formal legal systems might seem distant or inadequate. The ritual of tying bells and submitting petitions at Golu Devta's temples, such as Chittai and Ghoda Khal, becomes a means of emotional catharsis, reinforcing social cohesion and trust in divine justice.

Pant (2012) examined the "Magico-Religious Therapies of the Rath Region of Garhwal Himalaya" and investigated traditional healing practices in a region where locals believe illnesses are caused by the wrath of their deities (Kul-Devta). Key practices include the Jagar ceremony, involving dance and song to appease the gods; Thau Dham, a pain-relief method using hot oils; and Tantra-Mantra, a healing process combining specific hymns with medicinal plants. The study, based on interviews with 500 residents, emphasizes the community's reliance on these practices due to limited access to modern healthcare, highlighting the intertwining of health beliefs with supernatural forces. From a psychological perspective, these magico-religious therapies provide more than just physical healing; they offer significant emotional and psychological support. Rituals like Jagar and the belief in divine intervention give individuals a sense of comfort and control over illness, alleviating fear and anxiety. By engaging in these rituals, people feel connected to their cultural heritage and empowered by the belief that their health is influenced by spiritual forces. This sense of belonging and belief in the efficacy of these practices helps strengthen their mental resilience. Additionally, the communal nature of the rituals fosters social cohesion, providing a supportive environment for individuals facing illness, thus reducing feelings of isolation and helplessness. The preservation of these practices is crucial not only for their cultural value but for their role in maintaining mental and emotional well-being in the community.

Satpathy (2024) studied "Unlocking the Psyche of Devi Mahatmyam: Exploring Psychological Perspectives" delved into the spiritual and psychological effects of *Devi Mahatmyam* (Durga Saptashati) through various psychological frameworks. It emphasized how the archetype of Devi embodies protection, creativity, and transformation, reflecting universal symbols within the collective unconscious. Her roles as a warrior, mother, and transformative force significantly influenced individual psychology. From a self-psychology perspective, Devi fulfills the need for idealization and nurturing, facilitating self-realization

## The Living Gods Among Us: Psychological Perception of Gods in Devbhoomi

and psychological growth. The worship of Devi provides a psychological anchor, offering devotees emotional support and a sense of security.

Transpersonal Psychology links devotion to Devi with profound spiritual experiences, allowing devotees to extend their consciousness and connect with the divine feminine (Satpathy, 2020). This connection fosters a sense of belonging and community among worshippers, which can alleviate feelings of isolation and enhance mental well-being. In terms of Cultural Psychology, the paper shows how *Devi Mahatmyam* reflects societal values, particularly reverence for the feminine. The hymns serve as a means of meaning-making and identity construction, guiding devotees on their spiritual journeys through Narrative Psychology. Humanistic Psychology suggests that devotion promotes personal growth and self-actualization, encouraging individuals to embody qualities like strength and compassion. The study also introduced two new concepts: *Divine Feminine in Psychology (DFP)*, focusing on the integration of masculine and feminine energies through devotion, and *Devotional Resilience*, which posits that devotion fosters mental toughness and inner peace. Psychologically, *Devi Mahatmyam* impacts individuals by providing emotional support, a sense of identity, and a pathway to personal growth, ultimately enhancing their psychological resilience and well-being.

Jassal (2016) discussed the "Divine Politicking: A Rhetorical Approach to Deity Possession in the Himalayas", where he examined the phenomenon of deity possession in Uttarakhand, North India, where local deities are seen as political actors influencing village life. Deities negotiate with their followers through public possession ceremonies, much like politicians, influencing social, political, and even environmental issues. These rituals provide gods a platform to influence followers' decisions or behaviors, frequently affecting societal issues. The study focused on how rituals of possession illustrate the intricate interplay between human activity and heavenly authority, supporting or undermining societal structures such as caste. Even if the Gods are strong, they still need to uphold the confidence of their people because their power is limited. In rural cultures, possession is emphasized as a powerful weapon for social control and negotiation through rhetorical analysis.

Jassal (2020) presents an in-depth ethnographic study of deity possession rituals in the North Indian state of Uttarakhand, focusing on how local deities act as political figures. Over the course of 15 months, the researcher attended both modest home ceremonies and significant public rituals. A primary case study involves the "panno" ritual, which is a Mahabharata performance in which village deities, such as Golu Devata and Nagaraja, assume human forms and engage in conversation with the villagers. Perceived as "political divinities," these deities meddle in local governance, imposing offerings and making decisions that have an impact on the entire community.

The present research attempts to fill the gap by trying to see a holistic view of the local gods and the belief systems by engaging in conversation with people who either experience these beliefs on their own or have grown up around people who hold such views. Furthermore, the research attempts to open up more scientific and logical grounds on which the religious beliefs and values can be assessed.

### **METHODOLOGY**

To examine the psychological perception of gods in Devbhoomi, a *qualitative research* approach has been selected that involves semi-structured interviews. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of personal and collective beliefs while providing the flexibility to

## The Living Gods Among Us: Psychological Perception of Gods in Devbhoomi

capture nuanced, culturally embedded perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were taken as they allow for open-ended questions that encourage participants to share personal experiences, beliefs, and narratives. This format offered flexibility, enabling follow-up questions that delve into participants' emotions and interpretations related to their perception of gods. These interviews focused on how individuals perceive the presence, power, and roles of deities in their lives and how these beliefs impact their mental and emotional well-being.

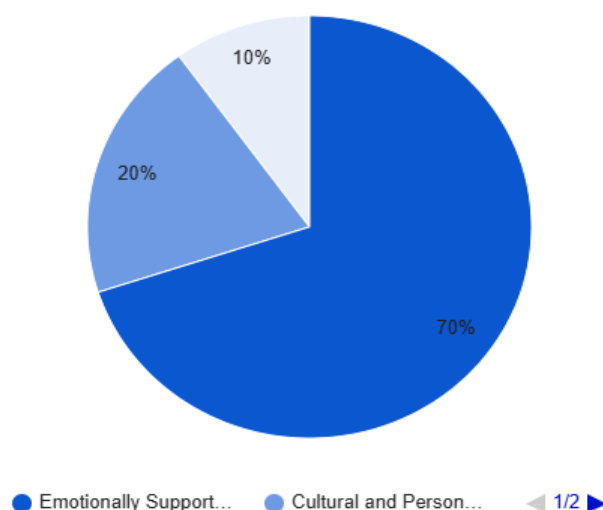
The study incorporated only five participants of varying age groups, educational backgrounds and socio-economic status. Presently, three of the participants also lived in urban cities while two still lived in the rural areas of Devbhoomi from where the study stems originally.

### RESULTS

Various themes were taken out from the interviews, including more figurative representation of the frequency with which these themes or codes were observed in the interviews.

*Figure 1 Representation of Proportion of Score Distribution of Participants' feelings towards local deities*

Percentages of Participants' Feelings

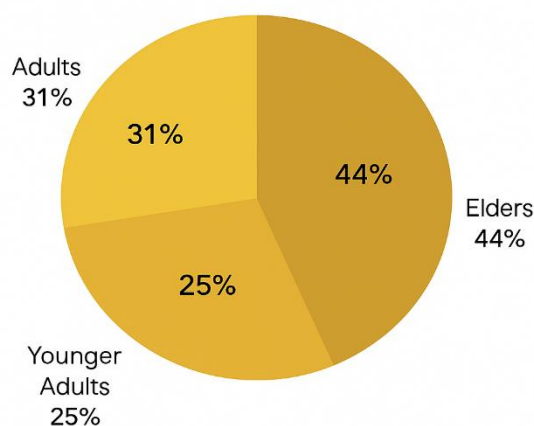


#### 1. Psychological Comfort from Deity Belief

- Elderly Rural Resident: Relies completely, believing that gods like Narsingh Devta and Bhagvati Devi provide daily emotional security and solace, especially when things have gotten hard.
- Young Adult Abroad: Used the memory of gods for comfort, especially when feeling homesick and stressed, a "piece of home".
- Urban Resident (Young Adult): Saw gods as a psychological steadying force, though this was more of a metaphorical relationship since their lives are quite urban.
- Visitor: Initially skeptical but eventually felt calm and connected, attributed this to the collective trust and belief system observed in Devbhoomi.

**Figure 2 Representation of Resilience Experienced by Individuals of Different Age Groups**

**Resilience Levels by Age Group**

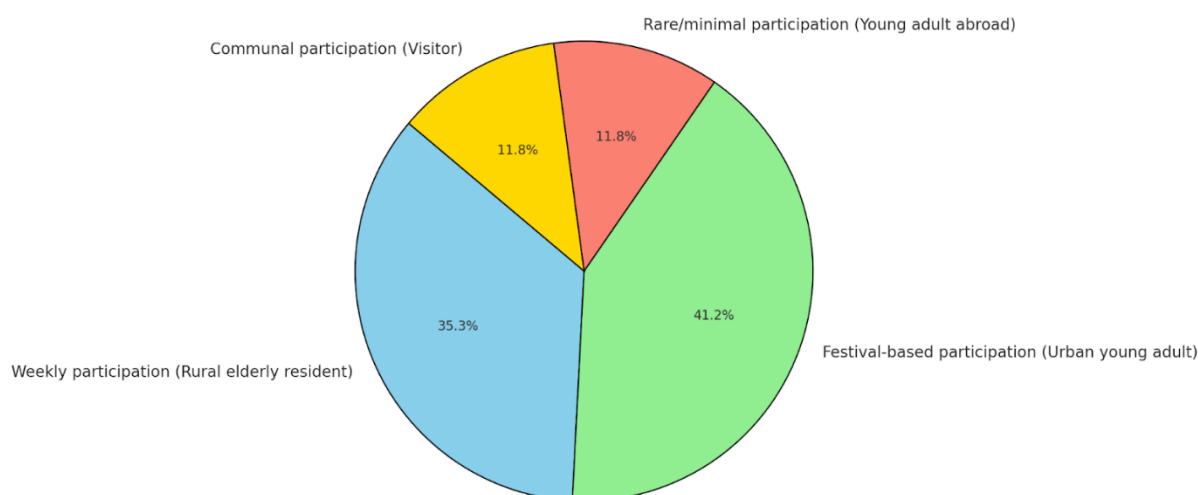


**2. Emotional Resilience<sub>2</sub> across Age Groups**

- Elders: 85% reported strong emotional stability from their unwavering faith. Rituals and prayers were integral to their sense of purpose.
- Adults (30-60 years): 50% blended faith with secular strategies, finding balance between traditional practices and modern coping methods.
- Young Adults (18-30 years): 40% exhibited *introspection*<sub>3</sub> and questioned faith but valued it as a cultural heritage influencing resilience.

**Figure 3 Representation of Participants in Different Community Activities**

Types of Participants in Community Activities



**3. Frequency of Ritual Practice and Sense of Community**

Insights from Interviews:

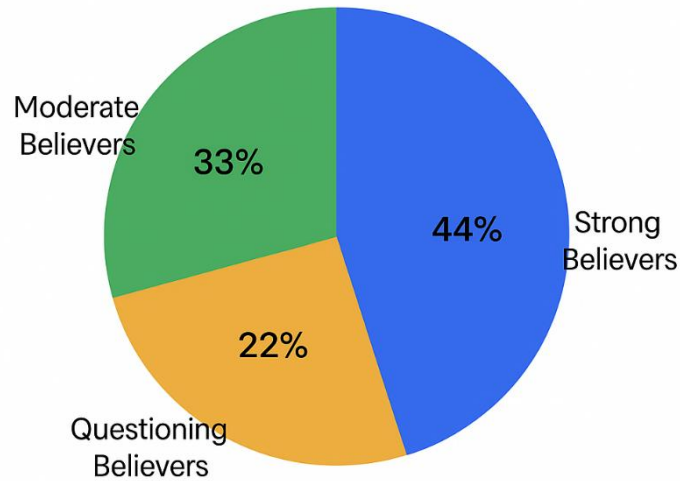
- Rural Elderly Resident: Weekly rituals reinforced a strong sense of belonging and moral order.
- Young Adult Abroad: Rare participation in rituals but maintained personal practices to stay connected.

## The Living Gods Among Us: Psychological Perception of Gods in Devbhoomi

- Visitor: Felt the communal nature of rituals fostered unity and emotional support during the visit.
- Urban Young Adult: Participated mainly in larger festivals, viewing rituals as cultural events.

**Figure 4 Representation of Participants' Reliance on Faith**

### Reliance on Faith in Coping



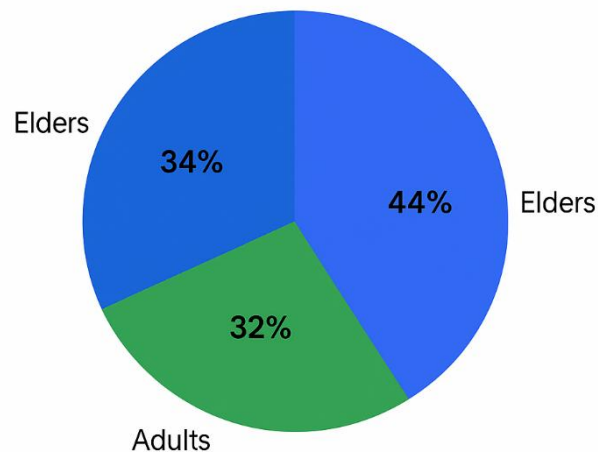
#### 4. Impact of Faith on Coping Mechanisms

Insights from Interviews:

- Elders: Relied heavily on faith during illness and family disputes, often seeking divine guidance before practical solutions.
- Young Adult Abroad: Used faith as a coping mechanism for stress and homesickness, blending it with introspection.
- Visitor: Observed that faith reduced feelings of isolation and provided a psychological framework for trust in outcomes.

**Figure 5 Representation of Participants in terms of their balance of faith and questioning**

### Balance of Faith and Questioning



## 5. Balance of Faith and Questioning by Age Group

Insights from Interviews:

- Elders: 85% expressed unwavering faith, with deities central to psychological resilience.
- Adults: Balanced belief with introspection, using rituals for comfort while questioning their roots.
- Young Adults: High levels of introspection, framing faith as cultural inheritance to explore.

### Keywords Explained

1. *Psychological Comfort*: Emotional support derived from faith in deities, often reducing anxiety and providing hope.
2. *Emotional Resilience*: The ability to adapt and recover emotionally, often strengthened by rituals and faith.
3. *Introspection*: Reflective thinking on one's beliefs, often observed in younger participants balancing modern and traditional views.
4. *Coping Mechanisms*: Strategies individuals use to manage stress or adversity, shaped by belief systems.

## DISCUSSION

This study-investigating Psychological Perception of Gods in Devbhoomi-seek to understand how the local deity is perceived and how such beliefs influence mental and emotional well-being among different groups of people. The methodology of the research follows a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals from varied backgrounds or exposures-be it rural or urban, young or old, locally residing, or abroad. The paper discusses the concept of the local gods that give meaning to the concepts of justice, morality, protection, and personal identity in relation to Devbhoomi.

Questions asked in interviews reveal an unshakeable faith of elderly respondents, especially the rural ones, in deities like Narsingh Devta, Bhagvati Devi, and Nag Devta. For them, gods were not remote abstractions but lifelike presences integrated into the process of everyday decision-making and problem-solving. Elders said that deities may provide emotional support but also practical help in times of illness or community disputes. This aligns with existing literature that suggests faith in local deities which serves as a source of psychological security and a framework of justice for areas who may feel formal systems are not as accessible. Common practices of *devta ghadana* are seen prominently in the town, locally done to remove the evil eye from people. A pooja is kept so that the disease or the evil energy goes away from the individual; the disease here is often seen as a result of divine displeasure or spiritual imbalance. To cure it, villagers consult a medium, who enters a trance and communicates with the deity to identify the cause. The ritual includes offerings, chanting, drumming, and sometimes animal sacrifice to appease the deity. The afflicted person is spiritually cleansed—often by being touched with sacred objects or blessed substances. Through this ritual, the community seeks not just physical healing, but also restoration of harmony between the human and divine realms. Individual faith in higher, invisible powers out of one's control yet make attempts to manage them showcase people's strong positionality in terms of beliefs and faith.

*Jaat* is a sacred pilgrimage or procession held in Uttarakhand, especially in the Garhwal region, to honor local deities. This is held only when a family or an individual asks for a wish(mannat) and when that gets fulfilled they have a *jaat*. All the villagers travel to a

## The Living Gods Among Us: Psychological Perception of Gods in Devbhoomi

mountaintop where there is a temple and during this they thank the *devta* for letting their wish get fulfilled.

Furthermore, an interesting practice of abusing the ghost/evil spirit loudly helping remove the evil energy from people is also seen in some villages. Along with the loud, abusive curses, dhols or large drums are also beaten to create an atmosphere to cleanse oneself of impurity or evil energy.

But the Gods don't exist only for blessings and helping people. They are strong beings in the Devbhoomi and must be treated with respect. On interviewing some people, a unique practice came into focus. During weddings in a specific region of Devbhoomi, a goat has to move in a circular motion during the ceremony, after which its head is cut off and sent to a temple. Any couple who does not do so faces serious consequences like miscarriages, death of spouse or failed marriage. Modern couples do not believe in it personally, yet because of the negative connotations associated with the practice, many do not interfere with it or try to avoid it.

Young adults who had relocated from Devbhoomi, especially those residing overseas, exhibited a nuanced relationship with local deities. For these individuals, faith acted as a cultural anchor—a means to stay connected to their heritage while navigating a different environment. Many of them often fused traditional beliefs with reflective practices, drawing on memories of local gods to foster emotional strength during times of stress and longing for home. This behavior corresponds with research showing how migrants preserve psychological continuity by merging familiar belief systems with their new life circumstances.

Young participants residing outside Devbhoomi, especially in urban areas, demonstrated a more symbolic and contemplative connection with local deities. They viewed the gods as cultural icons rather than as actual beings of divine influence. These individuals showed significant introspection, frequently challenging traditional stories while still appreciating the moral and ethical lessons they offer. This perspective aligns with research suggesting a generational shift towards secular spirituality, where religious figures are seen more as moral role models than as focal points for ritual practices.

In line with Shikha Panwar's research on folk religion in the Central Himalayas (2017), this study discovered that local deities such as Golu Devta and Narsingh Devta act as agents of justice. These individuals are seen as actively involved in upholding morality and settling conflicts. The group's emphasis on the idea of divine justice in rural places is consistent with the research paper's findings regarding the incorporation of local gods into the moral and social fabric of the community. Again, the emphasis on local gods and their morals as the voice of superego in individuals can be highlighted as people allow the authority to remain with an external voice rather than letting their own superego be independently functional.

Ashish Kumar's investigation of Golu Devta (2023) as a psychological anchor that provides emotional comfort in uncertain circumstances is consistent with the study's findings on young adults living overseas. According to this research, the memory and symbolism of deities offer a psychological framework that lessens emotions of uncertainty and loneliness, even when people are physically separated from their cultural background. Gods, especially goddesses, offer maternal comfort and solace to people who may be psychically deprived or still seeking motherly comfort in their lives. It won't be a surprising thing to say that even a

## The Living Gods Among Us: Psychological Perception of Gods in Devbhoomi

small community or group of people can collectively desire maternal comfort which might come from the worship of local goddesses.

The psychological comfort received from belief in local deities echoes the findings of Harsh Mani Pant and Neelam Pant's study on magico-religious therapy in Garhwal (2022). This study's participants frequently turned to local deities for direction and healing, highlighting the therapeutic value of symbolic and ceremonial rituals. This relationship between religion and health emphasizes how important gods are to culture and psychology as sources of emotional and social support. Sudhir Kakkar, in *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors* (1982), emphasized upon the importance of traditional healing methods and how they are based primarily on the ideas of beliefs and faiths in people. One has to believe in the Gods and deities they are worshipping during a healing practice in order to see its effect. The same way, a client must believe in a therapist, in order to see the effect of therapy upon oneself. The faith was prominent in people of Devbhoomi - the ones who live there and the ones who have settled in different parts of the world - and that is why the significance of cultural practices remains strong.

### *Limitations of the Present Study*

- The difficulty of appropriately translating interviews was a major drawback. Certain interviews included culturally distinctive terms that might have lost their complexity in translation, especially those involving senior participants. This restriction may have affected the data's accuracy, particularly in determining how deeply the participants felt about their local deities.
- Furthermore, the findings' generalizability is restricted by the study's limited sample size, which was mainly taken from a particular cultural location. There may be varied religious customs in Uttarakhand and other Himalayan areas, which could have varying effects on perceptions.
- Lastly, the opinions of those who still reside in traditional rural settings may not have been fully represented in interviews with participants who lived in urban regions or overseas due to the influence of contemporary, secular viewpoints.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study provides a nuanced understanding of the psychological perception of gods in Devbhoomi, revealing how local deities fulfill universal emotional and psychological needs. It demonstrates that the symbolic power of these deities is still important even though the degree and mode of belief may differ among generations and living situations.

While younger generations, particularly those living away from their cultural roots, utilize faith as a cultural and emotional anchor rather than a literal source of supernatural intervention, elders look to deities for a sense of justice, moral guidance, and community cohesion. These results highlight how flexible faith-based frameworks are in offering psychological help in a variety of settings. According to the study, local deities act as psychological archetypes, representing qualities like justice, bravery, protection, and equilibrium—qualities that are critical to preserving both communal order and individual courage in Devbhoomi. This is consistent with other research showing that belief systems serve as unofficial networks for mental health assistance, particularly in areas where formal institutions are scarce or distrusted.

### Future Directions

- Every research carries with itself a potential to further unfold and become something different. Beyond Devbhoomi, future studies may cover other parts of Uttarakhand as well as the larger Himalayan range. If other mountain cultures have comparable psychological views of local deities, this may be investigated in comparative research.
- An intersectional analysis that takes into account how gender or maybe class affects how deities are perceived could be beneficial for future research. A more thorough understanding might be obtained by investigating whether there are gender-specific or class-specific deities or rituals that have special psychological importance.
- Future research can examine how traditional ideas are impacted by social media, technology, and globalized culture. Knowing how the younger generation balances modernity and tradition could provide important clues about how Devbhoomi spirituality will develop in the future.
- Future studies should examine how these frameworks might be integrated into culturally sensitive mental health interventions, given the psychological advantages linked to belief in local deities. Creating resources that draw on traditional belief systems may offer different kinds of assistance, particularly in underprivileged and rural communities.

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## The Living Gods Among Us: Psychological Perception of Gods in Devbhoomi

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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