

Article

Divine Politicking: A Rhetorical Approach to Deity Possession in the Himalayas

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Abstract: In North India, political leaders are referred to as *netās*, and the term *netāgirī* is broadly and pejoratively used to describe the self-promotion, political maneuvering, and public rhetoric in which politicians engage. However, my ethnographic fieldwork in the state of Uttarakhand, India, shows that local divinities can also be *netās*: they vie for their constituents' support, make decisions that materially impact people's lives, and threaten to use force in implementing those decisions. These "political divinities" are routinely encountered as possessed dancers in large-scale public rituals in this region. In this article, I focus on how political divinities affect, and are affected by, audiences in tangible and far-reaching ways. I argue that public possession rituals open up a highly charged zone for inherently fluid, situational, and pragmatic negotiations between humans and divinities. While anthropological studies of possession view it as a sociopolitical event that trades in power relations, this article calls for a rhetorical approach to possession, which foregrounds possession as a way of persuading particular audiences of certain ways of thinking and acting in matters of collective importance.

Keywords: possession; ritual; Hinduism; politics; rhetoric; South Asia

1. Introduction

In the North Indian state of Uttarakhand, local Hindu deities become present in the lives of their devotees through divine embodiment or "spirit possession."¹ Scholars of religion have defined possession as "the experience by an individual of an altered state of consciousness and behavior attributed to the presence of a spirit, deity, or other supernatural being in or on a human body" ([1], p. 204). In November 2010, while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Uttarakhand, I attended a multi-day performance of the Mahabharata epic, known as *panno*, or *pāṇḍav nṛtya*, "the dance of the Pandavas."² Deity possession featured prominently in the performance that I witnessed, and numerous village deities were "danced" (*nacānā*) during the course of the village festivities.³

Before the performance began, while telling me about the cultural importance and the intricacies of *panno*, my village host commented that I would learn a lot about deity possession in my time in his village. In saying this, he lightheartedly substituted the term *nāc*, or possession-dance, with the word *netāgirī*, a Hindi-language term derived from the word for "politician" (*netā*) that I translate

¹ The Indian state of Uttarakhand was created in November 2000. It is made up of thirteen districts that were formerly part of Uttar Pradesh. Garhwal and Kumaun are the two regions that comprise Uttarakhand.

² For an in-depth account of the *pāṇḍav nṛtya* ritual performance tradition, see [2]. In this study, William Sax writes: "*Pāṇḍav nṛtya*, the 'dance of the Pandavas' is also known as *pāṇḍav līlā*, 'the play of the Pandavas'; is referred to idiomatically as *paṇḍavāṇī lagānā*, 'to recite the Pandava story,' or *pāṇḍavomī ko nacānā*, 'to cause the Pandavas to dance'" ([2], p. 20).

³ In ritual contexts involving possession, deities are "caused to dance" (*nacānā*) through the bodies of their human mediums. In so doing, deities are said to "come over" (*ānā*), "mount" (*chadhānā*), or "incarnate through" (*avatār lenā*; *avatarit honā*) their human mediums, variously referred to as animals (*pasvās*), horses (*ghorās*), or little horses (*dangariyās*). Cf. [2–5].

here as “politicking.”⁴ In other words, my host pointed out—in a comparison that surprised me—that deities can be encountered as politicians (*netās*). In this article, I ask: What does it mean to liken a deity to a politician? What does this comparison tell us about how village deities are known and experienced by their worshippers, and the broader relationship between ritual possession and the public sphere in rural North India?⁵ In this article, I argue that comparing deities and politicians—and by extension spirit possession and politicking—encapsulates how deities are known and experienced by their worshippers in Uttarakhand. Building on my interlocutors’ interpretations regarding the role of deities in village life, as well as my own experiences attending *panno*, in this article, I show how deities are made present in embodied form as social and political actors that are acted upon.

Similar to the English-term politicking, the Hindi term *netāgīrī* also carries negative connotations of engaging in political activity for personal and/or nefarious ends. It reveals how local deities in Uttarakhand, like human politicians, appear to their constituents or devotees as skillful rhetoricians and ambiguously powerful political players. On the one hand, village deities are upholders of the normative order and its attendant hierarchies through the threat or use of force; on the other, they can also subvert normative principles when it is necessary and/or convenient for them. This gives rise to the common perception that political divinities somehow operate above the law, as it were, often acting in morally ambiguous and self-serving ways. In this way, this article shows how public possession rituals are important sites through which to examine how citizens in rural North India relate to and understand local forms of government, which include divinities. Through possession in large-scale, public settings such as *panno*, deities interact with their constituencies, garner their support, and exert influence on village life. Through possession, prominent village deities involve themselves in local decision-making processes and intervene in matters of collective importance in tangible and far-reaching ways.

Political divinities are likened to human politicians, yet they occupy a different place in the sociopolitical landscape of rural Uttarakhand. For instance, during public possession rituals, political divinities appear to their worshippers immediately and in person when they are called, whereas human politicians are less accessible, seldom travelling to and interacting with ordinary citizens in remote villages of Uttarakhand. More importantly, the power and authority of a political divinity, unlike that of other political actors, is associated with ensuring the smooth and coordinated functioning of the human-social, natural, and divine realms. In addition to shaping the social, political, and economic lives of their worshippers, political divinities also affect the natural environment and the supernatural world. That is, not only do they maintain the fertility of agricultural lands and the health of livestock, they also protect people from supernatural agents of disease and misfortune, such as ghosts and ghouls (*bhūt-pret*). In other words, the responsibilities of political divinities incorporate aspects of existence beyond the purview of ordinary, human politicians.

However, possessing gods and goddesses are not always encountered as political divinities. They appear this way when they become active in the public sphere, particularly during possession rituals attended by a whole village or group of villages. Large public events of this kind are distinct from small-scale divination and healing rituals, consisting of one-on-one interactions between an afflicted person and an embodied deity, as well as from domestic rituals such as *ghaḍiyālā jāgar* (lit. domestic ritual of awakening), which are performed and attended by members of a single family-group.⁶

⁴ The word *netā* (politician) is etymologically related to the Sanskrit term *nīti* (political ethics).

⁵ Gerald Hauser defines “public sphere” as “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgement about them.” It is the locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meanings ([6], p. 61).

⁶ In addition to large-scale, public possession rituals such as *panno*, my research focused on two other major religious contexts involving spirit possession: first, private, one-on-one interactions between a deity and his/her devotee, mediated by a divination and healing expert known as a *bakkyā* (“speaker”). Such rituals usually take place in the home of the *bakkyā*. The second ritual I focused on is known as *ghaḍelā*, *ghaḍiyālā*, or *ghaḍiyālā jāgar* (“domestic ritual of awakening”). Here, the deity is “danced” (*nacānā*) to the accompaniment of drumming and the performance of narrative song. The chief ritual

For instance, when a deity such as Golu Devata is embodied in large-scale public rituals, his form and function becomes that of a political divinity⁷: he intervenes in matters of public, rather than private, importance; he is invoked by a village community, rather than by a single individual or family; and in return for safeguarding the collective well-being and material interests of the community, he makes significant demands not just on individual families but also on whole villages. However, Golu Devata does not appear as a political divinity in other ritual settings. During the performance of *ghaḍiyālā jāgar*, for example, he gives advice during times of crisis, heals physical and psychological disturbances, and provides other kinds of assistance to the family sponsoring the ritual. Therefore, a deity's designation as a political divinity is not an essential trait, but is rather dependent on the ritual context and place wherein the deity is encountered.⁸

2. Theoretical Framework and Methods

In addition to viewing possession as a negatively inspired religious event, a form of shamanism, a psychological phenomenon, and an ontological reality ([7], p. 79), anthropological studies on possession have been strongly influenced by notions of power and resistance.⁹ William Sax has observed that, in Uttarakhand, possession is an important means for contesting social prestige, and political benefits accrue from certain kinds of possession [2]. Possession, as we will see, is central to the public sphere in Uttarakhand and is part of the religious repertoire of landed elites and upper caste men. Similarly, Isabelle Nabokov (now Isabelle Clark-Decès) [9], working in Tamil Nadu, India, describes the “hegemonic” functions of possession rituals, in which the (female) individual is psychologically fragmented and “split apart” to account for her personal experience and, at the same time, to reproduce her received role within the dominant culture. From this perspective, possession is “a normative and legitimated activity” that is “an integral part of a self-regulating system of social control” ([7], p. 57). Building on these rich ethnographic accounts, I show how possession can be both an act of social subversion and social confirmation, what I describe as the marking and unmarking of social hierarchies and forms of belonging.

Scholars of possession have argued for the need to move beyond analyses of possession that read it as a symbolic expression of other, more real social conflicts [10]. That is, rather than view possession as a phenomenon that occurs solely between human actors, they take seriously the agency of the deity in public possession rituals. In this article, I show how a political divinity's presence and actions in the public sphere shape relations between humans and between humans and supernatural agents. I argue for a rhetorical approach to possession, in which political divinities employ possession as a means of persuading ritual participants of the soundness of particular ways of thinking and acting with regard

specialist in *ghaḍiyālā jāgar* is known as a *jāgarī*, *dhāmī*, or *guru*. This ritual performance takes place in the home of the individual sponsor of the ritual, and is attended mainly by the sponsor's extended family.

⁷ Golu Devata, Gvarral, or Goril, is worshipped in many parts of Kumaun and Garhwal; he is especially popular in Kumaun, in the areas surrounding the major temples dedicated to him in Chitai, Ghorakhal, and Champawat, where he is best known as a righteous dispenser of justice (*nyāya devatā*). For a compelling account of this deity in relation to the everyday lives and concerns of his devotees, see [5].

⁸ In terms of tone and tenor, interactions between deities and their worshippers in small-scale rituals are more intimate than public possession rituals, and entail a greater level of verbal back-and-forth between deity and worshipper. Additionally, public possession rituals take place less frequently than other kinds of possession rituals. While conducting fieldwork in Garhwal and Kumaun, I observed that while almost all the deities I encountered in large-scale public rituals were also active in the domestic sphere, not all deities who appeared in domestic rituals were also embodied as political divinities in public possession rituals. A deeper discussion of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this article.

⁹ I.M. Lewis is one of the most influential proponents of the power-resistance paradigm within possession studies. In his foundational work *Ecstatic Religion* [8], Lewis distinguishes between two forms of spirit possession—namely, “peripheral” and “central”—on the basis of their relationship to the dominant social order where they occur. He argues that, unlike in “central” possession cults, where possession effectively endorses normative social hierarchies, possession practices in “peripheral” cults are an indirect expression of sociopolitical resistance by marginalized groups such as women and low castes.

to matters of collective importance, through both intellectual and affective appeals.¹⁰ Possession is rhetorically compelling because it enables a deity to affect the emotions of his/her audience in a direct, immediate, and embodied way. The sensory power of possession goes beyond words, residing not only in the cognitive content of a deity's discursive appeals, but also, in the affective intensity—the joy, anger, and sadness—that the deity conveys through his/her physical embodiment in ritual.¹¹

A rhetorical approach to spirit possession resonates with Hildegard Diemberger's [15,16] work on female diviners and oracles in Tibet. She argues that spirit possession is best understood as an institutionalized way of addressing constantly shifting historical realities and, as such, it played a critical role in local politics. She writes that "[d]uring differences among the leadership, when critical decisions had to be made, female diviners are reported to have determined the outcome. *This was, however, a limited and contextual power* (italics mine [15], p. 144). In Uttarakhand, similarly, divine agency is constrained by particular rules or contexts. A deity may influence political institutions and civil society by involving her or himself in local decision-making processes, but because her/his powers are "limited and contextual," s/he must *persuade* audiences to think and act in certain ways; s/he generally cannot act unilaterally to magically will into a being a certain desirable state of affairs. In exercising her/his powers of persuasion through possession, a political divinity may, in some cases, ally her/himself with social and economic elites, and in others, with subalterns; however, much like a human politician, a deity will only forge alliances to the extent that the political welfare of particular individuals or social groups is tied to her or his own. In other words, such alliances are often provisional, temporary¹², and tactical¹³. In other words, possession in large-scale, communal, ritual performances is thus an inherently fluid, situational, and pragmatic activity through which gods and humans both further their own, often competing, interests.

To make this argument, I draw on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2010–2011 with healers, spirit mediums, musicians, and storytellers in the region of Garhwal, Uttarakhand. As part of my fieldwork, I attended ritual performances involving possession, ranging from small-scale, domestic rituals to large-scale, multi-day public gatherings, such as the *panno* ritual performance I describe below. In 2010, on a long bus journey across Garhwal, I unexpectedly met S.S. Pawar, referred to as Guruji, a retired government official. A mutual acquaintance had introduced us many months prior to this chance meeting, and I was aware that he was from a village in the

¹⁰ Drawing on Gerald Hauser's *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory* [11] and Chaim Perelman's *The Realm of Rhetoric* [12], Patricia Dutcher-Walls [13] writes: "through rhetorical language, a speaker or writer addresses a particular situation and attempts to influence the persons involved in the situation. In a situation where rhetoric is involved, symbols as language are used in "instrumental communication" which is "oriented towards goals such as changing opinions and actions" ([11], p. 45). Perelman focuses the study of "new" rhetoric on argumentation, how arguments are advanced to seek support or rejection from an audience for certain debatable theses, as opposed to ("old") rhetorical studies that looked at language as "ornamentation" only. So Perelman maintains that rhetoric "covers the whole range of discourses that aims at persuasion and conviction, whatever the audience addressed and whatever the subject matter" ([12], p. 5). Dutcher-Walls writes: "Using these discussions as background, I will understand rhetoric as the technique a rhetor uses to make an argument that addresses a particular situation and to persuade an audience about certain opinions and actions" (emphasis mine [13], pp. 66–67).

¹¹ See [14] for a discussion regarding the relationship between embodiment and emotions in ritual contexts involving spirit possession practices such as trance healing and glossalalia.

¹² By temporary I mean "non-permanent," not necessarily "of short duration," as certain human-divine alliances have the capacity to hold for generations.

¹³ For Michel de Certeau [17], a "tactic," in contrast to a premeditated "strategy," "depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities" . . . *The discipline of rhetoric offers models for differentiating among the types of tactics*. This is not surprising, since, on the one hand, it describes the "turns" or tropes of which language can be both the site and the object, and, on the other hand, *these manipulations are related to the ways of changing (seducing, persuading, making use of) the will of another (the audience)*. For these two reasons, rhetoric, the science of the "ways of speaking," offers an array of figure-types for the analysis of everyday ways of acting even though such analysis is, in theory, excluded from scientific discourse. Two logics of action (the one tactical, the other strategic) arise from these two facets of practicing language. In the space of a language (as in that of games), a society makes more explicit the formal rules of action and the operations that differentiate them (emphasis mine [17], pp. xix–xx).

vicinity of Pratap Nagar, in the Tehri Garhwal district.¹⁴ Guruji was very friendly, and knowing I was conducting research into Garhwali ritual performance traditions, invited me to attend a *panno* in his native village, Dyongarh, in a few days' time. At the time, I was on my way to a temple festival in the Uttarkashi district, but Guruji urged me to change my plans and accompany him to Dyongarh, which I did. I remained in Dyongarh as Guruji's guest for the following two weeks. On arriving in Dyongarh, I learned that the official headperson of the village was Guruji's daughter, and that Guruji, my host, was a wealthy landowner. He introduced me to other villagers who invited me into their homes and talked with me at length about *panno* and the religious practices that surrounded it. One of the people I became close to in this way was a man in his late twenties, whom I refer to as Barabar (lit. equal; cool) in my field notes.¹⁵ Because of my proximity to Guruji, the voices and insights of those in his circle have helped shape this study.¹⁶

In this article, I will first describe the *panno* ritual performance setting and its broader social context to argue that possession rituals can be both sites of sociopolitical exclusion and inclusion. For instance, by excluding certain bodies and subjects, possession in public settings can demarcate and buttress the boundaries of a village community. With respect to the latter, I focus on the ways in which possession does—and does not—empower people of lower social rank. In the next section, I describe how a political divinity instigated a village crisis by demanding an expensive tax or tribute, which led to a contentious public exchange and airing of grievances by villagers, revealing how notions of divine authority and agency are threaded through everyday concerns about local governance in the region. In the final section, I elaborate on how the village crisis was resolved through acts of politicking by both human and divine actors in the village, demonstrating how public possession rituals are sites of ongoing negotiations between competing divine and human interests. Because the powers of political divinities are governed by rules of context, I argue that possession is a means by which deities persuade audiences to think and act in particular ways in relation to matters of public importance.

3. Discussion

3.1. Performing Panno

The village of Dyongarh, where I attended a *panno* performance, consists of approximately one hundred and fifty families of mainly high caste Pawar Rajputs (lit. of aristocratic descent), as well as a handful of economically and socially marginalized Dalit families, who share the surname Das. The performance took place in a large ground in the center of the village, opposite the goddess

¹⁴ Pratap Nagar is famous for the now-abandoned and dilapidated palace of a nineteenth century ruler of the kingdom of Tehri Garhwal. From the palace, it was a long trek to Dyongarh, by way of winding, unpaved paths through dense forests, orchards, and fields.

¹⁵ Dyongarh was Barabar's ancestral village, but he lived and worked in Mumbai, in a "hotel" (restaurant). He had come home for the Divali holidays to spend time with his family, and had plenty of free time to show me around and introduce me to other villagers. Many people commented on the close friendship that developed between Barabar and me, because we were around the same age and both grew up in large metropolitan centers (Mumbai in his case and New Delhi in mine). However, they saw him as a troublemaker, and worried aloud, half-jokingly, that he would lead me astray. I refer to him as Barabar in my field notes because of his fondness for a certain kind of colloquial Hindu-Urdu specific to Mumbai, including the word *barābar* (lit. equal; cool), which he used frequently.

¹⁶ Prior to arriving in Dyongarh, my interlocutors had been mainly low-caste ritual specialists, particularly itinerant *jāgar* performers. They travelled frequently, as did I, going wherever they were invited to perform. As a result, my contact with Brahmins and Rajputs was less than with Dalits. As an upper-class male from New Delhi, high-caste sponsors of *jāgar* rituals would often invite me to eat and rest in their homes. However, this invitation was not extended to the low-caste *jāgar* performers, with whom I chose to remain. In contrast, in Dyongarh, I was the long-term guest of a wealthy and powerful family. Though I was able to freely interact with high-caste people in Dyongarh, my situation also had its disadvantages; in particular, I did not have many opportunities to interview the Dalit *panno* performers. During the day, I would see them busily preparing the costumes of the Pandava brothers and other performers; they worked as tailors, so it was their job to make sure all the costumes were stitched and ironed before each evening's performance. Because of how busy they were, I rarely had time alone with them. However, I also sensed that the other villagers weren't comfortable with me meeting with them privately; when we did meet, the performers were hesitant and guarded in their speech, especially about sensitive subjects such as caste.

Bhagavati Devi's temple, the largest, most significant temple in the village.¹⁷ In addition to hosting large communal events such as *panno*, the performance ground was used for village council (*pañcāyat*) and village association (*grām sabhā*) meetings.

No Brahmin (priestly) families lived in the village, so for important religious ceremonies such as *panno*, Brahmin priests were brought in from a neighboring village. In Uttarakhand, both Brahmins and Rajputs own land, and, as Gerald Berreman has described in detail, religio-cultural differences between the two groups are not as pronounced as in other parts of North India [19]. However, upper-caste Brahmins and Rajputs differentiate themselves strongly from low caste Dalits, i.e., people belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes, who make up approximately twenty percent of the population of Uttarakhand, as per the 2011 Census of India [20]. On an everyday basis, Dalits face great discrimination in this region, as they do in other parts of India ([21], p. 26); for instance, Dalits are often disrespectfully addressed using the derogatory term, *dūm*. Upper-caste villagers also commonly refer to Dalits as *aujīs* (lit. tailors) because, in addition to providing agricultural labor, they are occupied as tailors and musicians. During the *panno* performance, I witnessed a father and his teenage son play the drums and sing episodes from the Mahabharata for the duration of the nine-day performance. Despite being central to the performance proceedings, the low caste musicians and performers ate and drank away from the performance grounds and the high-caste villagers.

For nine nights, episodes of the Mahabharata epic, a long and bloody conflict between five brothers, the Pandavas, and their cousins, the Kauravas, were enacted. Five powerful brothers belonging to a landholding family played the Pandavas, and they were not possessed at any point during the *panno*. The five brothers resembled each other to a remarkable degree; they were all above six feet tall, with handsome, chiseled features; they wore their wealth and privilege with practiced ease. Every night during *panno*, the five Pandavas, holding toy-like bows, arrows, and maces in their hands—and wearing white turbans and tunics that had been washed and ironed by the *aujī* tailor-performers earlier that day—danced around the large ritual fire at the center of the performance ground. As the musicians introduced and narrated episodes of the Mahabharata, they muted or stopped their drumming. Following these brief periods of verbal narration, there would once again be frenetic bursts of drumming and dance, during which the voices of the musicians, strong as they were, could barely be heard at the edges of the performance ground.¹⁸

In addition to narrative song and drumming, possessed and non-possessed dancing (*nāc*) featured prominently in the *panno*. Other performers who became possessed included the designated mediums (*pasvās*) of important village gods such as Bhagavati Devi, Uneshvar Mahadev, and Nagaraja. Because Dyongarh was a predominantly Rajput village, all the designated mediums of village deities were also Rajput. Alongside these important village deities, ancestors, minor deities, and visiting deities from other villages also appeared in embodied form at various times during the performance of *panno*.¹⁹ These deities “took avatar” (*avatār lenā*) or “came over” (*ānā*) their mediums during *panno*. Most of the designated mediums I met had been born into their roles as *pasvās* of specific village deities, and their ancestors had performed these functions before them. In addition to the designated mediums, both women and men in the audience also spontaneously entered into trancelike states during the *panno*. That is, both professional/designated and non-professional mediums embodied supernatural beings during the performance.

The *panno* was organized by the village headperson—or rather, the husband of the woman who was officially the village headperson. The village headman told people where to sit, welcomed

¹⁷ The villagers informed me that the *panno* performance was essentially an extended *devī-pūjā* (goddess worship ceremony) for the goddess Bhagavati Devi. See [18], for a detailed discussion about the ritual worship of this goddess in South India.

¹⁸ In contrast to ritual contexts such as *ghaḍiyālā jāgar*, where narrative performance, drumming, and dance are given more or less equal weight, in the *panno* I attended, verbal narration of the Mahabharata was secondary to its enactment through dance. For more about the narrative content of such performances in Garhwal, see [2]. Also see [22] for a discussion about the role of oral narrative performance in South Indian ritual contexts.

¹⁹ The designated mediums of visiting deities were not all Rajput; some of them were Dalit.

guests, and decided when the performance would begin and end. He also introduced the characters and sometimes summarized episodes to explain what was happening. In the Dyonagarh *panno*, the headman also had the important ritual function as sponsor (*jajamān*), since he represented the village community as a whole.²⁰ At the commencement of each evening's performance, the men representing the Pandavas and the Brahmin priest brought in to officiate from a neighboring village sat in the Bhagavati Devi temple and performed their evening prayers. Within the temple, in a smaller enclosure that was shielded by a curtain, a receptacle containing a small quantity of soil had been sown with wheat on the first day of *panno*. This wheat, I was told, would grow miraculously by many inches during the nine-day *panno*—a miracle of the goddess within the temple.²¹ Each night of the performance followed almost the same sequence of events. After the villagers returned from working in the fields, they would eat the evening meal with their families, and then congregate in the performance ground. Meanwhile, the musician performers built a ritual fire and tuned their instruments outside the temple (as low caste individuals, they did not enter the temple). The musicians would start drumming, indicating that the night's performance had begun.

The Pandavas were not introduced to the audience on the first night of *panno*; they remained inside the temple. Instead, Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava brothers, was danced by an older woman from a neighboring village. Draupadi made an appearance almost every night of *panno*, for longer or shorter periods. The second night, the five Pandavas were introduced. They danced for the remaining seven nights, orbiting the central ritual fire (*dhūnī*), holding toy-like bows, arrows, and maces in their hands. The musicians sang of the Pandavas' legendary exploits and travails and, some nights, the headman and the person representing Arjuna also joined the musicians in introducing the events of the story. In the next section, I explore how the *panno* ritual exemplified both the marking and unmarking of social divisions and forms of belonging.

3.2. Sociopolitical Acts of Possession

3.2.1. Exclusion

One night, unidentified deities possessed or "came over" two women in the audience. One of the women, who happened to be Barabar's mother, danced rhythmically and gracefully. The other swayed and lurched around the performance ground erratically. She veered towards the musicians and grabbed and pulled on their drums; she then raced dangerously close to the ritual fire burning at the center of the performance ground, making the audience collectively gasp with fear. The village headman folded his hands and bowed reverently in front of Barabar's mother, but he confronted the second woman, holding and shaking her. Scolding her aggressively in front of the audience, he told her to stop doing "drama," using the English word. "This is no place for *harāmī nāc* [lit. forbidden dancing]," he said. The underlying meaning of the headman's statement was that the woman did not have the right (*adhikār*) to participate in the ritual; her possession display was illegitimate and inauthentic.²² She seemed visibly embarrassed by this public admonishment, but did not stop dancing right away. People sitting around me surmised that she was trying to save face, even though she had been "found out," so to speak. A few women in the audience laughed quietly under their shawls and sari ends.

²⁰ *Jajamān* was the term used for the "sponsor" of the ritual by the villagers themselves. In contrast, in small-scale *ghaḍiyālā jāgar* performances, the male head of the family usually serves as the *jajamān*.

²¹ In Dyonagarh, Bhagavati Devi is identified as a form of the goddess Parvati. In parts of Uttarakhand, Bhagavati Devi is also known as Raj Rajeshvari, Chandravati, or Nanda Devi. For an in-depth account of Nanda Devi pilgrimage processions, see [23].

²² The word *harāmī*, used adjectivally, also means "devilish." Initially, I thought the headman was characterizing the woman's dance as "devilish" because her movements were jerky and inelegant, possibly indicating that she was possessed by a dangerous, malevolent spirit. However, this was not the case; the headman was calling into question the authenticity of her possession dance, implying that the woman was feigning being possessed.

What made people think the woman was feigning being possessed?²³ Barabar told me that he had confronted this same woman before, and she had intimated to him that she was under the influence of “some powerful *devatā* [deity].” But then when the headman accosted her, she quickly relented, having no choice but to give up her “drama.” I asked Barabar how he and the headman had been able to judge whether her dance was authentic or not, and he replied that they knew because she was no longer a member of their village. Even though she had been born in Dyongarh, after getting married, she had moved to her husband’s place of residence, a small neighboring town. As per the patrivilocal norms followed in the area, i.e., after marriage, a woman “leaves the village of her birth (her *mait*) and moves to the home of her husband (her *sauryas*)” ([21], p. 78), she had now become a resident and citizen of her husband’s father’s birthplace. In other words, “she [was] no longer a part of her natal family and should not, for example, observe birth and death pollution for them, but only for her husband’s family and lineage ([21], p. 78).” My companion continued: “Did you notice how she suddenly became all calm [*śānt*] after the headman confronted her? That would not have happened if some *śakti* [spirit/deity] had truly overcome her. One always knows if and when someone is truly possessed, because the possessing beings are all well-known deities [*jāne māne hue devatā*], and these deities never ‘come over’ [*ānā*] outsiders.”

In other words, because this woman was married, she was now an “outsider” (in relation to Dyongarh, her natal home) and therefore unable to participate fully—and authentically—in the ritual. This event demonstrated how possession in public rituals cannot happen to anyone and everyone. Only particular people—in this case, legitimate members of the village community—have the right to embody village deities. In this way, by excluding or delegitimizing certain bodies and subjects, bodily acts and narratives shore up the village community and its boundaries. In the words of J.Z. Smith, public possession is a kind of “*focusing lens*, marking and revealing” significant aspects of village belonging ([24], p. 54). These rules of village “belonging” or “membership,” however, do not apply solely to humans; they also apply to supernatural entities, especially “well-known deities [*jāne māne hue devatā*],” who, my companion said, “never ‘come over’ [*ānā*] outsiders.” In other words, in addition to the identity of the human medium, the provenance and agency of the possessing being is also important. I therefore see possession as a moment when integral and implicit connections between deity, person, and village become explicit through ritual, in the space of the village ground²⁴. This happens both intimately, that is, through the body, but also in a highly public and social way, requiring the legitimacy of others, including possessing deities.

3.2.2. Inclusion

In *panno*, possession was not only about negotiating community membership through acts of exclusion; it was also a site of inclusion and boundary-breaking, although the latter was not necessarily subversive. During the performance, I noticed that those who became possessed often embraced the low-caste musicians, touched the foreheads of the performers to their own, or caressed their faces with their hands. This highly intimate physical contact was striking because of the Dalit performers’ status as “untouchables” and the careful maintenance of purity-pollution taboos in other settings. However, in *panno*, the otherwise inviolable boundaries between the lower- and upper-caste villagers became porous. Such moments of inclusivity and ritual *communitas* have been described extensively in the anthropological literature on possession. In fact, the capacity of possession rituals to empower and elevate people of lower social rank has become one of its defining features.

However, when I offered my interlocutors this explanation, they rejected the premise but offered different interpretations regarding the permissibility of such intimate physical contact. One of

²³ Judging the veracity of possession states is a speculative exercise in which audiences regularly engage; unlike what I had assumed, such questioning was not limited to “outsiders” such as professional anthropologists.

²⁴ See [25–27] for discussions regarding mutually constitutive relationships between person, place, and divinity in South Asia.

the stock explanations I heard was that *aujīs*—as key intermediaries between deities and their worshippers—were no longer considered “untouchable” (*achyūt*) during the ritual performance. They were described as “servants of god” (because the literal meaning of the word *dās*, their surname, is “servant”) and physical contact with them was a blessing—something that an upper-caste person actively sought. However, this explanation did not account for the everyday mistreatment of low-caste individuals that I witnessed in Uttarakhand, nor did it explain how or why the category of “servant of god” did not translate into everyday life.

Other explanations stressed divine agency in this process, something that has been overlooked in anthropological discussions of this subject. Possessing gods did not differentiate between high- and low-caste people, some villagers argued, as these deities “were above such concerns.” Since only gods have the power or capacity to withstand contact with so-called untouchables, a high-caste person embracing a Dalit indexed the presence of a god in/on a high-caste person. From this latter perspective, caste hierarchies were not challenged or transformed in any sustaining way. Dalit performers had not become less “impure” through contact with high-caste persons; rather, what such contact affirmed was the powerful and magnanimous nature of the possessing deity, brought into relief against the low status of the performers. Because the high-caste person performing intimate physical contact was embodying a deity, this act represented the deity, rather than the high-caste person, lowering himself/herself to the level of the Dalit musicians. For this reason, even though physical contact between high- and low-caste persons does not necessarily upend normative social hierarchies, it could be read as a loving and generous gesture on the part of the deity. On the other hand, this moment could also be seen as a self-serving gesture on the part of the divinity, confirming his/her own privilege, because it indicated that the deity could bend social rules when s/he desired, since deities transcend the everyday moral world. In this sense, deities followed classical Indian theories of kingship and governance by granting special dispensations to the lowliest among their constituents, their “servants” (*dās*), tempering their enforcement of social order and hierarchy (*danḍa*) with occasional acts of compassion (*kripā/dayā*), such as during ritually-produced and ritually-circumscribed moments of intimate physical contact between high- and low-caste persons.²⁵ Either or both of these explanations might be true; however, what is important here is that the deity’s own agency, rather than the agency of the high-caste person, is foregrounded.

As we will see in the following section, similar to kings and modern politicians, deities also demanded something from their devotees in return. The following section describes how deities operated as political divinities by intervening directly in village affairs, namely, during my fieldwork, an important local deity instigated a village crisis in Dyongarh by demanding an expensive tax or tribute.

3.3. Divine Taxation

In 2009, during the previous year’s *panno*, an important village deity known as Nagaraja had demanded that the villagers provide him with a drum made of silver (*cāndī kā dhol*).²⁶ Since this was a difficult, expensive offering, the god, speaking through his human medium, had promised that he would provide half the capital for the drum, and that the villagers would be responsible for the other half. The villagers took the god at his word and agreed to collect their share of the funds.

²⁵ In *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* [28], David Shulman explains the concept of *danḍa* in the following way: “The king’s contamination by evil must be seen as bound up with the very essence of his activity as a ruler, or in the language of royal symbols, with his exercise of force—*danḍa*, the power of the staff, symbol of his right and duty to punish” ([28], p. 28).

²⁶ Nagaraja (lit. the serpent-king) is one of the most widely worshipped deities in Garhwal, Uttarakhand. Two of this deity’s most well-known temple sites are Sem Mukhem, in Tehri Garhwal, and Danda Nagaraja, in Pauri Garhwal, both places where I did extensive fieldwork in 2010–2011.

Each family in the village had contributed 750 rupees towards the purchase of the silver needed for the drum—*cāndī kā candā* [lit. donations for silver], as one of Barabar’s friends alliteratively put it.²⁷

On the fifth night of the *panno*, I heard that the episode of the slaying of the rhinoceros was to be enacted. I was very excited because I had never before seen this episode performed, even though I had been told about it numerous times.²⁸ The rhinoceros in the story was represented by a pumpkin, which would be smashed by the person representing Arjuna at the end of the night’s performance. However, that night, the performance took an unexpected turn. As people streamed into the performance ground, the village headman announced that, while he and a few of the village elders had been inside the goddess temple, the village deity who had the previous year demanded the silver drum had once again spoken (*bāk bolanā*) to them. The audience was informed that the god had decided *not* to provide the other half of the funds needed for the drum. The headman explained that the villagers would have to donate another 750 rupees; in other words, pay double the amount that was initially agreed upon.

This announcement led to an uproar among the villagers; the audience talked angrily among themselves, trying to absorb the news. The headman continued: “As you know, not making the drum is not an option, for this is what the god wants, and we have to comply with his wishes, as hard as it may seem. Also, we need to come up with the money in the next few days; we need to buy the silver as soon as possible; time is running out.” The urgency in the statement was conveyed by the fact that misfortune and illness would befall the village if they did not comply with the god’s demands. Indeed, one of the villagers with whom I was sitting suggested that the villagers pool their money as soon as possible to “ward off the *doṣ* [punishment/affliction]” that would surely befall the village if the deity was refused.²⁹

The headman’s warning to act quickly, on top of the request for double taxation, was not well received. Someone in the audience shouted in protest: “How are we going to come up with such a large sum so quickly? This is our hard-earned money; we barely have enough left over from paying our debts from last season and feeding our families; now you want us to raise even more money for this silver drum, for which we have *already* made a collection [*phānt*]?” I was sitting with Barabar and his friends, a group of young men, who started to heckle the headman. One of them said: “What are we supposed to do now? We should punish [*daṇḍa denā*] him [the deity] for going back on his word. If one of us backed out of an agreement, he would punish us, wouldn’t he?! Who does he think he is, fooling us in this way?” I was surprised to hear disrespectful comments against the deity voiced so openly. The headman, visibly irritated by these words, turned away.

The deity’s demand precipitated a crisis not just for individual families who had to shoulder an extra financial burden, but for the village as a whole. One of the core debates centered on where, that is, in which temple, the silver drum should be kept. One of the villagers, who also happened to be the designated medium of the goddess Bhagavati Devi, argued that the silver drum should not be housed in the deity’s temple in Dyongarh, but rather, in the larger temple that was shared by a group of approximately 20 villages. However, this suggestion was contested. One of the prominent land-owners in the village defiantly replied: “There is no way our village is going to provide all this money for the silver so that people from other villages can enjoy the fruits. The drum, once it is made,

²⁷ In 2012–2013, the per capita GDP for the state of Uttarakhand was 75,000 rupees per year [29]. In other words, the donation requested was 1% of a family’s annual income.

²⁸ For an in-depth account of this culturally significant story and its enactment in the context of Pandav Lila performances in Garhwal, see [2], pp. 64–93).

²⁹ The term *doṣ* has a range of meanings, including “fault,” “blemish,” and “sanction.” William Sax writes: “A *doṣ* is believed to be not so much the result of a divine being’s ill will as an automatic result of people’s failure to complete their religious duties. Thus the verb is almost always used in a passive rather than an active sense: The *doṣ* adhered [to us] [*doṣ lag gayā*] rather than ‘The god gave us a *doṣ*’ [*doṣ lagāyā*]” ([2], p. 49).

will remain in our village, in our own temple." The person seated beside me whispered that the deity's "big temple" already had ten silver drums of this kind, so it hardly needed another.³⁰

While the deity's demand for the drum may seem like a whimsical or selfish desire, it had significant bearings on the prestige of the village as a whole. In particular, in the discussion of where the drum should be housed, the village's standing in relation to neighboring villages was at stake because the greater a village's financial contribution, the more it could assert itself in inter-village disputes over water rights, the distribution of shared grazing lands, road-building, maintenance, and so on. Thus, by requiring the village to make its presence more visible in relation to other villages in the area, the deity was symbolically and materially benefitting his constituents, it could be argued, and acting as a political divinity. However, not everyone in the village saw it this way, especially the poorer families who could ill-afford a second donation of 750 rupees, and that too without any immediate benefit or guarantee of support.

In the midst of the heated back and forth occurring in the middle of the performance ground, the headman suggested—in an uncharacteristically conciliatory manner—that the poorer families be exempted from the collection. At this, the economically better off villagers became furious: "Then why should anyone pay? If others don't pay, why should we be forced to cover their share?" The younger men in the audience became especially rowdy.

The argument about the silver drum soon transformed into a heated discussion about the villagers' everyday concerns and difficulties; in other words, the ritual performance of the *panno* slipped into the form of a local village council meeting. Some people began complaining about sanitation and hygiene issues in the village, and how certain persons left trash outside their doors and on public paths, with little regard for others. They argued about peoples' lack of "community spirit" and enthusiasm for public works such as temple renovations and building projects. People mentioned that the village school was in dire need of supplies such as desks, chairs, and writing materials. They angrily protested the exorbitant price of everyday necessities in the village shops, saying that the village council needed to do more to make the predatory traders and shopkeepers keep their rates down. Most importantly, villagers lamented the lack of progress in constructing the main road leading to the village—which had been funded but was still not ready, even though the village council had assured everyone years ago that it was close to completion. "This is why our costs are so high," some villagers exclaimed, "because you [the village council members and powerful elders] are not applying adequate pressure on the district officials to finish the road.

Rightly sensing that he was losing control of the congregation, the headman abruptly brought the public airing of grievances to an end: "Tomorrow morning there will be a meeting [*baitḥak*] of the whole village—everyone must come, no matter what other work they may have; attendance is not optional. But any family that does not bring their share of the collection money [*phāntḥ*] will be severely penalized," he announced to the crowd. The headman's remarks left no room for further argument, even though the villagers continued to talk among themselves.

It would be relatively easy to read the events I've described thus far as an elaborate ruse on the part of village elites, who used the deity's demand for a silver drum to extract additional revenues from the village. Indeed, among the villagers themselves, there was a great deal of suspicion surrounding the village collection. Some told me that since a party of high-caste, landholding villagers would invariably be entrusted with buying the silver and paying the merchants and artisans to make the drum, they would likely keep some of the money for themselves. However, even though some mistrusted the village authorities, no one openly questioned the ontological reality of the deity, his desires, or his agency as a social actor in this scene; as such, reducing the complexity of this debate to human power relations misses a key element in this performance. Even though it was possible that village elites were

³⁰ My companion informed me that such ceremonial drums were most often displayed at temple festivals and during pilgrimage processions (*jāt/jātarā*), for instance, when a deity's palanquin (*dolī*) traveled to the Kumbha Mela.

coopting the deity to further their own agenda, political divinities were known to make exorbitant demands of their worshippers in exchange for protecting and providing for the village.

At the same time, this crisis also revealed how the position of a deity, similar to an elected politician, is not unimpeachable. As was illustrated by the young man's outburst about punishing the deity for going back on his word, a deity can be questioned, disobeyed, or even punished for not meeting his obligations to the village community. The public nature of the debate around the deity's request also demonstrates how, as a local political divinity, a deity is answerable to the village community as a whole. In doubling the amount of money required for the silver drum, the deity was thus also taking a risk; if he was seen abusing his authority, he could fall out of favor with the community and be forgotten. As a political divinity, a deity depends on his constituents for his fame and fortune, as they depend on him for their health, security, and prosperity; this symbiotic relationship is imperiled when one or the other party fails to meet its obligations. The precarity of this relationship was laid bare in the debate in which the villagers pushed back against the deity's demands, while also being wary of the consequences of disobeying him.

In addition to the complicated give-and-take between humans and political divinities that occurred, this event was also significant because the deity's demands allowed villagers to openly air their everyday grievances. While open debates do not always occur during *panno*, I argue that the appearance of the deity as a political divinity in the *panno* context allowed such discussions to occur. In fact, the event I have described was the most candid public exchange of people of radically different social standings that I witnessed during fieldwork. In the conclusion I will say more about a political divinity's role in creating an atmosphere conducive to such a frank, open, and heated exchange. From rich landowners to poor day laborers, men and women, old people and young, everyone shared their concerns about the socioeconomic welfare of the village.

The airing of grievances in this highly visible manner also meant that the issues raised had to be systematically dealt with by village authorities. In the village meeting that occurred the following day, the village authorities were forced to answer for the delay in the road-building project, because of the public outcry the previous night. The headman promised that he and his delegation would once again visit the District Magistrate's office to speed up the process of completing the road so it would be ready for the next harvest. For final arbitration on matters relating to rising costs, the acquisition of building materials, and so on, a village council meeting was hurriedly scheduled for the following week. Therefore, the debate that had spontaneously erupted during *panno* was not only a space of critique but also a space where a new agenda for the village was collectively forged.

3.4. Failed Negotiations, Successful Politicking

The public airing of grievances that occurred after the headman's announcement was not the conclusion of the crisis. After the debate wound down, I thought I would finally get to see the "slaying of the rhinoceros" performed before the night's end. However, it was not to be. Later that same night, after the *panno* performance eventually resumed, the political divinity appeared directly to his constituents. Around midnight, the god's medium emerged from the temple and sat down at the edge of the performance ground. His body started to tremble and jerk, his jaw clenched and unclenched, and he started sweating and muttering incoherently—all signs that the deity was "coming over" his medium and "taking *avatār*." Suddenly, the medium, growling and hissing angrily, turned to the headman and gestured that he approach. The headman, with hands folded and head bowed, walked over to the embodied god.

"Don't you recognize me?" the god asked the headman, slurring his words, as the audience strained to decipher his meaning. "Who am I?" he asked, rhetorically. Then, referring to the various deities who had made appearances alongside the Pandavas in the performance ground, he stated: "No one who has danced [*nācanā*] before will dance tonight; now only ghosts and ghouls [*bhūt-pret*] will dance!" This announcement perturbed the audience, although it was unclear to me what the deity had meant by saying "now only ghosts will dance." Would ghosts and other malevolent supernatural

entities enter and inhabit human bodies in “dance,” or would they be invisible to human eyes, I wondered.

The musicians kept playing, and the deity’s medium continued to endure his bodily spasms, his gaze distant and unfocused. During this time, the medium of another deity, known as Uneshvar Mahadev, who had been danced for a short time the previous night, arrived on the scene and sat down beside the first deity.³¹ A white muslin cloth was draped around his shoulders and otherwise bare, wiry torso; his hair was open, reaching down to his waist. This second medium was from a relatively poor, predominantly Dalit village in the area. When he had arrived from his village earlier that evening, he had prostrated himself at the bottom of the temple steps and touched the feet of the village elders to seek their blessings, but because he was Dalit, he had not entered the temple. As soon as he sat down at the edge of the performance ground, he too started to tremble; before long, both the first and second mediums had begun to dance alongside each other in front of a captive audience.

The second deity mesmerized the audience with his superhuman display of speed, agility, and power. He moved as if propelled by some external force, as if something outside of his body was hurling and spinning him around. In comparison, the first deity’s movements were rhythmic, regular, and stable. His steps fell to the ground with a determined weight. His arms were held firmly in front of him in an almost defensive position. Together, they raced to the edges of the performance ground, only to be drawn back to the central fire, like moths to a flame. While the two deities danced in front of the spellbound audience, the designated medium of the goddess Bhagavati stormed out of the temple and immediately began to dance with the two other embodied deities.³² The goddess skipped and hopped across the ground, waving her arms by her side, as if imitating a bird in flight. Her dance was not as animated as that of the second deity, who was spinning out of control, but nor was she as grounded as the first. She was hovering somewhere between them, both in terms of her energetic relation to the other two deities, as well as the way she appeared suspended in the air as clouds of dust arose around her feet. Suddenly, in the middle of her dance, the goddess stopped dancing. She rushed to the ritual fire and picked up a heavy burning log. Brandishing this log above her, she ran towards the audience. There was a loud commotion in the audience as she hurtled towards them. A group of children seated in the front backed away in fear as the enraged goddess approached. Older audience members jumped in front of the children, forming a protective barrier around them. The goddess stopped in her tracks, and the headman and some village elders rushed to meet her. She was yelling and screaming at them, but her words were not fully audible to my companions and me. The elders tried to wrest the burning log from her, but they were careful not to touch the goddess herself, as this would have angered her even more.

³¹ Uneshvar’s human medium was a visitor from a relatively poor and predominantly Dalit village in the area. Unlike the mediums of Nagaraja and Bhagavati Devi who were Rajputs, Uneshvar’s medium was Dalit. I was told at the time that this god had a special relationship (*sambandh*) with Nagaraja, and would therefore travel from far away to dance alongside him. Interestingly, Guruji later said to me that public rituals such as *panno* were not only sites where villagers from different social groups and walks of life congregated, but also, where deities had a chance to meet and interact with each other.

³² While the deities danced in the performance ground, I sat beside Guruji and other village elders, on the steps leading up to the goddess temple. Guruji had called me to sit with him, as he wanted me to have a good view of what was happening in the performance ground; he told me repeatedly me to take out my video camera to film the dancing deities. While sitting with the elders, I overheard one of them say that Uneshwar’s medium seemed very frail, and that his deity was too strong for him—the human medium was being overwhelmed. Someone responded that this was to be expected since he was from a poor Dalit village and probably didn’t have access to the nourishing food that was needed for such strenuous ritual work. Surprisingly, everyone agreed with this analysis. “Yes, a good diet is important, for if the vessel [body] is not strong enough to contain the god, the god’s *śakti* will easily destroy it.” It was interesting to hear them connect the social and economic background of the medium, his diet, and his possession-dance. Guruju had earlier mentioned that a medium needed to be emotionally, mentally, and physically pure, so that the god, likened to a wind (*havā*), would enter into him. In this case, however, it seemed to be a question of the medium’s solidity and resilience as a vessel. For this ritual purpose, professional mediums needed to eat well in order to strengthen their bodies. The social, caste and economic background of a medium was therefore important—part of an everyday calculus through which people evaluated, talked about, and understood possession.

Meanwhile, the village elders started to question the goddess. The Brahmin priest ran to join them—the first time I had seen him leave the temple area. He sprinkled an auspicious and magical substance known as *pañcamṛta* (lit. five-nectars; a powerful liquid that he prepared every night prior to the performance) on the goddess, which had its desired effect of calming her. However, she was still trembling violently, and it was clear to everyone that she was extremely upset. The elders asked her what the matter was, as they doused her with *pañcamṛta* and made her drink water.

The embodied goddess continued to scream and resist for some time, until she became more composed and coherent. Speaking clearly, she exclaimed: “The shoes! The shoes! Why are there shoes in my temple?” The priest begged her to forgive them, as everyone scrambled to pick up the audience members’ shoes and sandals that had been strewn at the edges of the performance ground. People in the audience had taken off their footwear when they had sat down to watch the performance earlier that evening, but even though their shoes had been left in untidy piles near the temple, they were by no means “in her temple.” Nonetheless, people grabbed the offending footwear and hurled them far away from the goddess and her temple. Seeing this, the goddess became less unruly and allowed herself to be led away from the audience.

Meanwhile, the other two deities continued dancing as before. They had been dancing for a long time, so I assumed that they would soon stop. However, instead of stopping or slowing down, the first deity—who had demanded the silver drum—started to speed up and gain momentum. Instead of dissipating energy, he seemed to draw it in. His movements became angry and chaotic. Like the goddess before him, he too started veering closer towards the audience every time he circled the fire. The audience, especially the women and young children, retreated even further. Everyone was on their feet, on high alert, unsure what to do and how to respond. In an effort to control the god, the musicians varied the rhythms they were playing on their drums, but to no avail. There was something menacing about the way the god was spiraling out of control.

The villagers with whom I was sitting, and the audience in general, interpreted the deity’s threatening dance as a warning or punishment for contesting his demand for a silver drum. After consulting with the village elders and the Brahmin priest on the temple steps, the village headman was advised by his confidantes to “cool” the god down and make him peaceful (*śānt*). After several moments of the headman awkwardly following the god around to try to catch a hold of him, the headman finally succeeded. The deity was re-seated at the edge of the performance ground. The headman tried to engage him in conversation, but there was no response, so the Brahmin priest was beckoned. The priest applied vermilion to the god’s forehead, sprinkled *pañcamṛta* on him, and whispered incantations into his ear, which seemed to awaken and alert the deity.

The god then started to speak, but even those in his immediate vicinity, namely the headman and the priest, had to lean in closely to hear his words. By contrast, the headman spoke loudly to make clear to the audience that he was interceding on their behalf. He asked the deity to give the village more time to collect the money needed for the silver drum. Or, he said, the deity might reconsider fulfilling his pledge to provide half the needed capital. He explained that it was extremely difficult for the villagers to come up with the money, “since there is a *ghāṭā* [a deficit of funds] in the village.” The headman spoke to the god with folded hands, looking down. On hearing the headman’s request, the god flew into a rage, screaming that he didn’t care about “any deficit.” “Stop talking nonsense! I don’t want to hear excuses,” he exclaimed, lunging forward to strike the headman, who dodged the blow nimbly. “What deficit? What deficit [*kaisā ghāṭā*]?” the god shouted.

“Forgive me, lord,” the headman replied, while the god vacuously parroted the headman’s speech, like a child learning a new word. The deity seemed to be losing focus, so the priest once again stepped forward to sprinkle some of the *pañcamṛta* on the deity. Staring into the distance, the god was clearly in no mood to negotiate with the headman or the village. It became obvious that the villagers would have to collect more funds for the drum. The gods’ displays of anger had put an end to their protests against the additional collection. The mood of the audience changed from indignation and irritation

to quiet resignation. The only thing left to do was seek the deity's blessings, now that he was calm and stable.

The headman was the first to approach the god to seek his blessing; the god reached into a tray that had been placed beside him, grabbed a handful of rice and vermilion powder, and smeared it across the headman's forehead. This gesture signaled the end of the evening's events, and the audience cautiously lined up behind the headman to obtain the god's blessings. Some tried to rush the line, not sure how long the god would be present, not wanting to miss their chance to be blessed.

At 8 a.m. the next morning, I returned to the performance ground to find the village meeting, which the headman had called the previous night, in progress. The headman held a ticket book in his hands, much like a bus conductor. He sat behind a rickety office desk that had been placed at the center of performance ground, close to the smoldering embers of ritual fire from the previous night. In front of his desk, a snaking line had formed, with one male member from each family in the village carrying their share of the donation, the additional 750 rupees needed for the drum. The headman collected the money and provided receipts to the villagers; methodically, one by one, he checked off people's names in his ledger in an act of what we might call divine bureaucracy.

4. Conclusions

How might a rhetorical approach to possession help us understand the resolution of this village crisis, in particular, and relations between political divinities and their constituents, in general? Prior to the fiery and threatening display in the performance ground, villagers had resisted what they saw as an unjust tax by the deity, and, in the process, the village authorities and their management of public affairs were also challenged. Public opinion suggested that by not providing his share of the needed funds, the deity had acted improperly and unethically. At the same time, the incident also reveals something important about the limited agency of the deity. The deity could not unilaterally force or make the village participate in a second collection for the drum. Rather, as we see through the exchanges between the deity and human actors, persons had to be persuaded to think and act in accordance with his wishes. To do this, the deity had to appear before the village in embodied form and speak directly to his devotees. He also had to verbally remind the village of his power—"who am I?" he repeatedly, and threateningly asked his devotees. The deity also threatened to put a stop to the villagers' beloved and festive *panno*, and transformed the performance ground into a site that would be overrun by dangerous supernatural entities, bringing harm to the village community when he stated, "now only ghosts and ghouls will dance." Through these various threats and tactics of persuasion, all of which involved possession, the deity was able to convince the reluctant villagers to meet his demands and participate in a second collection.

As a rhetorical strategy, possession encompasses more than verbal communication and negotiations taking place between a deity and his or her devotees; it also allows the deity to *act*—or threaten to act—in particular ways.³³ The full, embodied presence of the deity in the performance ground—especially his fiery dance—had a powerful impact on the villagers and affected their choices. Earlier, when the audience in the performance ground was told that the deity would not be fulfilling his end of the agreement, villagers had reacted angrily, and some had even suggested the deity should be punished for his actions. However, when the deity appeared directly before the audience, people did not overtly challenge him. Rather, the deity's angry appearance quelled the debate. Witnessing the deity state his demands directly, in the flesh, had a much more persuasive effect than hearing about them second-hand. The embodied presence of the deity in possession—as a social actor that was also acted upon in the here-and-now of the performance ground—was instrumental in quelling dissent

³³ Earlier in the evening some had suggested that villagers pool their resources to satisfy the deity as soon as possible because, if they did not, *doṣ*—i.e., the deity's wrath manifested as affliction, misfortune, and suffering—would "attach" (*laganā*) itself to the village; the villagers would be punished for not bending to the deity's wishes.

and manufacturing the collective consent of the village. Thus, the rhetorical power of possession is closely tied to an aesthetic of immediacy.

In Uttarakhand and elsewhere, the immediacy of possession enables supernatural agents to meaningfully engage with the human-social world and its shifting realities. Through possession, deities are firmly rooted in *this* world, and not some otherworldly, transcendent realm, removed from the everyday concerns of ordinary people. Possession enables the deity to make his presence felt and his wishes known to his worshippers in real time; he then subsequently convinces them to think and act in ways that are desirable to him, even though these desires may have negative consequences for his devotees. In this way, deities shape, and are shaped by, local political and social concerns.

Scholars of possession, such as Frederick Smith and others, have argued that possession in South Asia, unlike elsewhere, is not primarily about politics. For example, Smith writes:

Possession is often interpreted as an expression of social control, or at least its attempt, a category that includes political power . . . This political influence in South Asia, however, is hardly felt because, despite the widespread practice of possession, it has not gained sufficiently broad formal recognition to influence religious or political bodies, as it has, for example, in certain places in Africa where possession argues much more visibly a politics of identity based on a sense of colonialist victimization, or in Tibet where the Nechung oracle has had a history of influencing the politics of the Dalai Lamas ([7], p. 56).

However, my ethnography of *panno* shows that spirit possession in Uttarakhand is by no means only a private or subjective experience. It is deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday life in the Himalayas as a mainstream, legitimate feature, and I have argued that local village deities can be productively seen as political divinities in this process. *Panno* created a political context in which a heated public exchange—which was much more than simply about the deity’s demands—about the state of the village could take place. It was precisely because the deity’s power and authority superseded that of the village elites that the less privileged villagers were allowed to openly challenge the latter and vent their frustrations. The context of *panno* opened up a space for villagers’ airing of anxieties and concerns about the proper functioning of local government and civil society, such as the difficulties people were facing as a result of the delay in completing the main road leading up to the village. Because of the issues of collective concern raised during *panno*, village authorities were held to account in a village meeting (*sabhā; baiṭhak*) that was called for the next day, as well as in a village council meeting that took place the following week. Even though final governance and administrative decisions rested with the village council, the council, too, had to acquiesce to the deity’s demands, and oversee a second collection for the silver drum (although, as I mentioned, some villagers questioned their transparency in this process).

The deity’s demands also made visible the divine-human hierarchy that governs village affairs in this region. As my interlocutors described, everyone in the village was equally answerable to the deity, people of lower socioeconomic status as well as the village council and village elders. In this sense, the direct and immediate experience of a political divinity through possession had had an empowering effect on ordinary villagers, though, of course, this was a temporary effect, tempered by the additional tax that was levied on them.

In South Asia, scholarship on possession has seen it as compensatory behavior used by marginalized groups such as Dalits and women. In *panno*, there was some evidence for the subversive and counter-hegemonic effect of possession on social relations, but, as I argue, this was not the whole story. For example, in *panno*, women in the audience were spontaneously possessed. Similarly, Dalit musicians played a central part in *panno*. However, in Uttarakhand, public, large-scale possession rituals also shored up the authority of socioeconomic elites—that is, persons who are male, landed, upper caste, and upper class.

Moreover, possession rituals can be sites of both sociopolitical exclusion and inclusion. For instance, in the case of the woman who was accused of *harāmī nāc* (forbidden dancing) by the

village headman, possession in public settings was instrumental in demarcating and buttressing the boundaries of a village community. On the other hand, a high-caste person, physically embracing a so-called untouchable musician during *panno*, might be read as an act of social inclusion and boundary breaking. However, such physical contact was not necessarily subversive, in that it does not challenge or transform caste hierarchies in a sustaining way. Rather, what such contact affirms is the powerful and magnanimous nature of a political divinity, brought into relief against the “impurity” of the Dalit performers.

Many villagers read the deity’s desire for a silver drum, his failure to provide half the capital, and the subsequent need for a second collection, as ways for village elites to extract additional revenues from the village at the expense of ordinary villagers. They suspected that village authorities and the deity were colluding against the interests of the majority. As a result, people protested both the deity (“he should be punished”) and the village elites, who they saw as complicit in this act of coercive and unjust taxation. In these critiques, deities and other supernatural beings were salient and shrewd actors who engage in fluid, contextual, and pragmatic relations with humans and each other. However, deities and social elites did not always act in each other’s interests in large-scale public rituals involving possession. We see, for example, that the headman played both sides, colluding with the deity to double the villagers’ share in the collection, on the one hand, and then later interceding on the villagers’ behalf to ask for more time, on the other.

Understanding deities as political divinities helps us see how people in Uttarakhand construct a particular ontological and ethical worldview towards authority and governance. In this worldview, local authority does not exist in a purely secular realm; rather, when it comes to collective decision-making and debate, village institutions—such as the village council under the leadership of the headman—work hand-in-hand with deities and other supernatural entities. At the same time, public possession rituals also shed light on how people view the state and politicians as having limited and contextual powers. A deity may influence social and political life, and he may intervene in public decision-making processes, but he must persuade particular audiences to think and act in certain ways. The god cannot unilaterally bring about a certain state of affairs. In this sense, public possession rituals are sites of ongoing negotiations between competing divine and human interests. While in some cases a political divinity may ally himself with elites, in others, he may do so with low caste members of the village. As my interlocutors described, much like human politicians, a deity will only make alliances to the extent that they benefit him personally. And, much like a human politician, a “political divinity” is also at the mercy of his constituents. The divinity, too, must seek re-election periodically, and is always at risk of losing his seat and falling out of favor if he doesn’t deliver on his promises.

The rhetorical approach to possession offered in this article sees it as a form employed by both human and non-human agents to persuade spatially and temporally-located audiences—by way of intellectual and affective appeals—to act and think in particular ways. In this sense, public possession rituals in Uttarakhand are sites of ongoing negotiations and shifting power dynamics not just between humans, but also between human and non-human actors. In large-scale, communal performances such as *panno*, possession emerges as a situational, tactical, and goal-oriented activity through which divinities, social groups, and individuals further their own interests, which may or may not be aligned.

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