

Exclusion in Deity Possession Rituals in Kumaon: Women mediums and viewers locked in the structures of Caste, Gender, and Religion

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Abstract

Deity possession rituals in India have long been imbued with the politics of gender and caste and quite recently, Hindu nationalism. Thought of as the preserve of the male and mostly, Hindu nationalist, upper caste elites, deity possession rituals are often criticized as exclusionary, with negligible female participation in the ritual conducted in Supi village in North India. The gap in the current scholarship on possession and gender in the Indian context entails a lack of analysis of the impact of recent socio-political and economic changes on women's exclusion from religious participation. Employing the analytical framework of Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality, I explore the reproduction of women's exclusion and the continuity of patrilineage. Furthermore, I use Deniz Kandiyoti's "patriarchal bargain" to highlight women's feminist consciousness of their exclusion and engagement in strategies to negotiate ritual patriarchy for their social mobility. I thus, further contribute to a wider understanding of how women mediums and viewers express agency while adhering to an overall ritual structure through employing the understudied arena of "home." Drawing from ethnographic work done in 2018, 2019 and 2021 and using semi-structured interviews with the organizers, participants and viewers of rituals, my analysis demonstrates the ritual's creation and maintenance of power through its growing interaction with the subliminal relations of changing social structures and religious organization and thus, I argue that neither social structures of caste, gender, and Hindu nationalism nor social and religious forms of patriarchy are sufficient to account for the persistent exclusion of and discrimination against women in possession ritual practices and sacred spaces.

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Introduction

In the north Indian state of Uttarakhand, constituting of Kumaon and Garhwal, deity possession rituals occupy a central position in the local religious worship and today, they are practiced alongside Hinduism. They are collective rituals in which gods and goddesses are “awakened” in the bodies of human mediums or shamans by the performed narrative, drumming, and singing by ritual initiators (Feol 2010, 32). Besides its significance in healing, seeking justice, and ancestral worship, possession rituals play a significant role in combination with other social structures of caste and gender in the construction of gender expectations and norms specifically women’s exclusion in participation in rituals and temples.

Thought of as the preserve of the male, Hindu nationalist, and upper caste elites, possession rituals are labelled exclusionary, with negligible engagement of women, performance of female shamans and the criticism of lower caste participation in ritual coordination. From my short preliminary fieldwork in Kumaon in 2019, I learned that the region has both men and women mediums however, it (my study village-Supi)¹ forms an exception to putting strict restrictions on women mediums and viewers’ mobility in sacred spaces, participation and performance in the rituals and access to certain religious positions such as ritual initiators or organizers as compared to women in the neighboring villages and Garhwal region. In this form of possession rituals, women (irrespective of their caste and mediumship) can only participate as viewers or audience members. In terms of caste, while ritual organizers and mediums can be from lower or upper caste categories, a ritual initiator must be a male member of the lower caste. The ritual authority of the lower caste ritual initiators often turns controversial and viewed with contempt by the upper caste male elites. As a result, it is important to study these rituals through a gendered lens to understand the challenges faced by women mediums and

¹ Supi village is in Kumaon region (Uttarakhand, North India) where most people communicate in the local dialect Kumaoni and Hindi although few people hold conversational fluency in English as well.

viewers and whether the predominantly male setting of the ritual is open to the former's performance in the ritual.

These structural and restrictive forces of caste and gender in deity possession rituals have been further impacted due to the rise of Hindu nationalism and its ideologues (since the 90s) in North India. The upper caste male elites serving as mediums, initiators, and organizers in the rituals are also supporters and even members of the Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing nationalist political party, its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and their other partner organizations, Bajrang Dal. Only in the last decade, these organizations began employing techniques such as the appropriation of dalit folklores and history and linking to major Hindu mythology, Ramayana (Narayan 2009) to mobilize members of lower castes specifically, Scheduled Caste voters or Dalits to increase their share of power and to strengthen their mission of 'Hindu unity' by othering and excluding Muslims.

While the scholarly works on possession in India such as Ram (2013), Sax (2002, 2008) and Jassal (2016) have successfully highlighted the interconnectedness and of gender, caste, and cultural norms on women, they do not take the national concern of Hindu nationalism or other socio-economic changes such as nuclear family system and monetization into consideration and how that informs women's exclusion and the possession ritual. This is where my ethnographic study is contributive through a gendered analysis of factors of social change. The other goal of this research is to contribute to the body of recent scholarship that has challenged the assumption that women depicting lack of resistance to patriarchal norms are victimized or passive (Mahmood 2005; Burke 2012; Bilge 2010; Kook and Harel-Shalev, Chakravarti 2003). Mahmood (2005) highlights women in mosque movement entail agency through self-cultivation. Burke (2012) and Kook and Harel-Shalev (2020) recognize 'compliant agency' and "ultra-orthodox patriarchal bargain" respectively in which women exercise

agency as they conform and “redetermine” to religious norms. Chakravarti (2003) argues that for most upper-caste women, access to material and symbolic benefits such as economic resources and social power are at the cost of conforming to patriarchal norms of their families and communities. In this vein, my analysis views women mediums, and viewers (who are mostly upper caste) as agents who are aware of their interests, gendered marginalization, involved in strategizing while accepting and fostering the ritual structure.

This research project aims to examine the creation and maintenance of power in possession rituals through the politics of caste, gender and Hindu nationalism which fosters institutionalized exclusion for women mediums and viewers. I argue that neither social structures of caste and gender nor social and religious organization are sufficient to account for the persistent exclusion of and discrimination against women in possession ritual practices and sacred spaces. Women mediums and viewers avoid openly invoking patrilineal authority in enforcing and perpetuating their own exclusion and extreme marginalization. This does not contend that they are unable to identify the causes behind their exclusion, they have in fact cultivated consciousness of their exclusion through mediumship and possession. However, it is a strategy to avoid confrontation with the patrilineal authority (male, upper-caste, and Hindu nationalist) at a time when they lack the support and consensus of their society or co-operation from other women to challenge gendered relations in ritual practices and move towards gender equality. The religious patrilineal authority, lack of civil society, and caste-based divisions in the region and amongst women mediums and viewers hinders them to mobilize collectively. Instead, it has pushed them to look for substitutes and less risky ways to challenge their low position in the ritual and sacred spaces. It is quite common for most women mediums and viewers to appeal to the same agency in the ritual that grants them a low status, denies them of the religious roles and participation.

Socio-historical Context of Kumaon

Hinduisation of the region

The first rulers of Kumaon came from a small Khasi tribe from Alakananda valley in Garhwal (Oakley and Gairola 1977, 12) and established their capital in the Katyur valley of Almora district in Kumaon, (Atkinson 1974, 467-468). Although Buddhism was gaining popularity during their period, the Katyuris supported the Hinduisation of the region. They are alleged to have been inclined towards Brahmanical culture and during this time, in North India a rise of Hinduism was in progress, large numbers of migrants such as pilgrims and traders visited and settled in the region (Joshi 1990, 50-62). According to Sanwal, the Katyuris provided land grants to learned Brahmins from the plains to settle in Kumaon (1976, 23). Following the Katyuris, the Chands came into power through the marriage of a local Katyuri princess with its Prince Som Chand, where the latter received a part of the remaining kingdom of east Kumaon as dowry (see Atkinson 1974, 497-499). The Chands also brought Brahmins from the plains to act as priests and administrators and Rajputs from plains formed their armies. Moreover, they supported and sustained orthodox Hinduism. Likewise, the Gorkhas and the British (who arrived after the Chands) also established the ritual and ideological supremacy of the Brahmins and the Khasas tailored to this by giving upper caste families or the Brahmins administrative positions and along with 50% exemption on all duties and taxes (Pande 2013, 7). During the eighteenth century, the Muslim rulers attempted periodic invasions in the region; however, they were not successful in establishing their power as a result, Kumaon was left relatively free from the influence of Mughals and Islam. The spread of Hinduism did not overpower the practice of the deity possession rituals rather the people in Kumaon practice them alongside Hindu rituals.

Reconfiguration of Caste

The influence of Brahminical culture in Kumaon also reconfigured the caste structure. In Kumaon, only three categories of varna (caste) are characterized and each one is divided into sub-castes. It includes the Brahmans, locally referred to as Baman or Pandit; the Kshatriyas known as Thakurs or Rajputs; and the Untouchables, locally termed as Harijan, Dom or Shilpakar. The Vaisya and Shudra categorizations are not represented, although some Doms have occupied the Sudra status (Fanger 1980 cited in Pande 2013). The doms in Kumaon which have been referred to as lower caste in this paper are engaged in sculpting, carpentry, and tailoring which in other parts of India are associated with the work of Shudras. The caste stratification in Kumaon as described above births from a lineage system which is based on the agricultural system (occupied by the Khasis) and communitarian customs like shamanic practices like jagars and shyurat which prevented the widening of inequalities (Pande 2013, 2). Under this system, only the distinction between the peasants and the artisan groups was identified (ibid). The religious belief system (consisting of the possession rituals) also obviated the ritual boundaries between the artisans and the peasants, who lived in the same village (ibid). In my study village called Supi, only two caste categories are represented, thakurs and doms where the former constitutes a relatively larger percentage than the latter along with one Brahmin family. It would be empirically incorrect to rely on a vertical varna hierarchy to study the caste relations in my study village and region, thus, I borrow Raheja's central framework, which positions thakurs (here, the saukār- ritual organizer, mediums, Hindu nationalists) as the center of the caste system that balances the flow of money (Raheja 1988), the management of impurity (aśuddha) and inauspiciousness (aśubha), and social capital (Rankin 2004). However, such positionings are rather fluid in the context of my study village as the same religious positions are assumed by lower caste men.

Research Questions

The main research question that this research project seeks to explore is- How does the interconnection between gender, caste and religion impact the participation and performance of women mediums and viewers in possession rituals? I approach this question through the first set of sub-questions which examine the gender and social aspects of possession rituals- In what ways does the allegedly male, upper caste focused nature of the possession rituals manifest itself? What is the basis and nature of this social structure of the ritual in terms of gender and how it impacts the female shamans' participation, performance, and authority as compared to male shamans? Is the exclusivity of the traditional authority or ritual structure reinforced? Following this are questions that intend to explore the relationship between religious and the social disparities of ritual practice- What is the relative status of women and men regarding symbolization, valuation, participation, performance, opportunity, power, and constraint? Finally, I explore how the gendered religious disparities in possession rituals interact with larger political concerns such as Hindu nationalism. In what ways does women's agency manifest itself in these rituals?

Methodology and Positionality

For this research project, I have employed several ethnographic methods to collect the primary data. I have attended deity possession rituals conducted at individual homes and in temples between November 2020- April 2021. I also conducted 12 individual semi-structured interviews and 3 informal group interviews in Kumaoni (local dialect)² with mediums, organizers, ritual initiators, viewers, most of whom were upper-caste and self-identified members of Hindu nationalist organizations³. Some of

² All the translations from Kumauni to English had been completed by me manually except for one of the segments which was a communication between mediums in trance in vernacular Kumauni. My father, who has native fluency in Kumauni (and its vernacular forms) offered to help me in the translation of that segment to Hindi, later translated to English by me.

³ Three proxy names have been employed in this study as per my participants' requests to conceal their name identities- Nirmala, Pujan Singh and Janki Devi. I chose to keep the gender identities of these three participants because of the gender

these interviews were intertwined with the oral history methodology specifically with mediums and women who experienced afflictions due to possession to explore the process of becoming a medium and recovery. It was useful to study the social change in ritual practice and understand the generational change witnessed by the participants of the ritual. Moreover, this study also relies on observations and some semi-structured interviews with women viewers between July and August in 2018 and 2019 for my undergraduate thesis on ritual healing and medical pluralism. The previous work has been useful as it provided me with easy access to the site and networks built during my experience as an audience member and a researcher.

At this point it becomes imperative to make clear of my positionality. I was born in Kumaon although I grew up in different regions in North India. As a viewer of these rituals since the age of seven, I enjoy dual status of being both insider and outsider. Born into an upper caste family (thakur-kshatriya lineage), I have witnessed as well as been subjected to procedures of the rituals and possess an intimate understanding of the experiences of some family members who have resorted to these rituals for their illnesses. I am, simultaneously, however, also an outsider, for I have spent my past years of schooling and undergraduate education in other regions and countries partly detaching me to the experiences of its interaction with recent phenomena such as Hindu nationalism and development in the region. Being born and descendant of an upper-caste family in Kumaon and a researcher pursuing her education in the west provided me with easy access to my interviewees. I have conducted all my interviews in participants' homes and workplaces such as fields, kitchens while being engaged in drinking tea, which facilitated trust between the participants and me. These intimate spaces allowed women and men to share their experiences of mediumship, possession, and the ritual. Establishing trust was not always an easy task for me, as my identity as a researcher who has received her education from

framework of this project. The names of other participants and their identification has been used as it is and with their consent.

outside India created suspicion occasionally. When I went to a participant's home to conduct an interview, the elder son of the interviewee who is also a medium intervened, inquired about my research and said that my western-scientific educational background would fail to fathom the spiritual divine power divine and it was not right of me question the authenticity of the deities. This was one of the concerns that I had to overcome in the field to make sure by clarifying the purposes of my research so that the interviewees could comfortably open to me about their experiences.

Theoretical Frameworks and Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, using the analysis of the ritual and case studies of afflictive forms of possession, I highlight how the ritual as a fundamental part of the “gender order” (Abraham 2019) shapes the opportunities and constraints of women undergoing affliction along with the social structures of caste, gender, and other factors such as social and religious organization and economization of the ritual. Chapter 2 is a continuation of the previous one, where the notion of exclusion of women mediumship is further explored through the analytical lens of intersectionality while employing the ethnographic material. Although intersectionality arose from the work done by black feminists in the United States and United Kingdom on the hierarchical nature of inequality and dominance (Bilge, 2010), its focus on ‘multidimensionality’ or intersecting systems of the subjects’ lived reality (Crenshaw 1989, 139) proves to be a useful analytical tool to study gender marginalization in the Indian context. Possession rituals in India being extremely multi-layered with the existence of caste, Hindu national identity, and cultural norms means that the inequality and exclusion faced by women differs due to the intersection of two or more of these categories. The third chapter employs Deniz Kandiyoti’s notion of “Patriarchal bargain” to explore women mediums and viewers’ exercise of agency through strategizing for their safety, autonomy and sacred blessings while contributing to the social reproduction of structures of power.

Chapter 1. Deity Possession Rituals

In Kumaon, deity possession rituals are public, formal, and manifested in two forms, the first one, which is locally referred to as jagar is usually conducted at an individual's house (home ritual) whereas the one conducted in the local village temples is regarded as shyurat (temple ritual). A home ritual has been identified as a form of oracular treatment or a healing ritual (Leavitt 1986, Dein 2002), a ritual of justice (Malik 2009, Sax 2002, 2006). The important difference between the two can be best understood based on their purposes and length, a home ritual approximately lasts for an hour and is always organized to inquire and seek cure for afflictions having a relation to spirits which is identified and informed to the seeker and his family by the medium. When I asked Suresh Ram, a lower caste ritual initiator, about the meaning and purpose of home ritual, he stressed that “they are always organized for people undergoing periods of distress. It is never conducted during ecstatic periods of life. When afflictions occupy people then, they conduct a home ritual” (in-person interview, April 2021). Whereas a temple ritual is a collective village festival organized annually in celebration and honor of all the local deities, where all members of the village (except those undergoing through periods of pollution such as death, birth, menstruation) participate. It usually begins from pre-midnight followed by short breaks to until the morning of next day.

Most sociological and anthropological scholarly literature concerning possession showcases a continued empirical association between women and possession. In her ethnography of the zār cult in Sudan, Boddy observes, “Possession activity is mainly though not exclusively the province of women. Somewhat more than 40% of Hofriyati women ever married and over the age of fifteen claim a zār affliction.” (1989, 138). Similarly, in South Asia like elsewhere, more women seem to undergo possession than men (Smith 2006, 68). Kapferer work on sorcery and exorcism in Sri Lanka also claim, “women are more often the subject of rites of healing and cults of exorcism than are men” (1991, 92).

This concurs with my observations in Kumaon as well where more women experience afflictions due to possession. In contrast, more men than women appear to be engaged in more official, public, and divine possession rituals. What requires more attention is why women occupy the lowest position in mediumship and official and public forms of possession despite women's greater experience of the phenomenon. Important to exploring why this is the case and perhaps always has been, is an examination of power relations of gender, caste, and the social and religious organization of the region. Specifically, in this chapter, I seek to examine how deity possession rituals at homes and temples foster the exclusion of women through the upper-caste male dominance operating in the field. In what ways women participate in exclusionary forms of possession? How is such exclusion manifested through relative symbolization, opportunity, and constraints of men and women? This chapter and the following chapter will explore these questions through engaging with the ethnographic material.

This chapter offers a detailed analysis of how the ritual is conducted and organized followed by two case studies of women undergoing afflictive form of possession to explore the relative status of men and women in valuation, participation, power, and constraints informed of the power relations of caste and gender. Firstly, possession I argue, brings women either undergoing illnesses or engaged in their 'traditional' housework to the realm deity possession rituals and sacred spaces which are usually dominated by men. Secondly, while deity possession rituals reflect some feminine imagery and symbolism, liminal moments of gender and caste subversion, I argue that it appears in conjunction with the social denigration and low status of women in the rituals and everyday life. Therefore, the place offered to women in the "word of religious imagination" stands inversely and thus must be differentiated with the place given in the actual world of religious life (King 1995).

Home Rituals

Prior to organizing a ritual, when a person is afflicted, the decision towards seeking treatment of any kind is usually influenced and determined by the senior family male members or neighbors usually women who may urge or suggest the afflicted person visiting a medium from their network in case the illness does not recover with biomedical help or appears to have a link with spirits. After the afflicted person visits and confirms the cause with the medium either individually or a male member would require accompanying in case *daani*⁴ is shown, thereafter, senior family members (usually male) are informed and consulted. In this process, senior women who relatively possess more power than junior women may influence the decision to organize the ritual; however, the final decision is made when the male members offer to agree and participate. After the final decision is made, a male member would be required to verbally invite the medium along with sending personal invitations to the ritual initiator or *das*⁵ and his assistant⁶ who are invariably male and lower caste. However, some upper-caste men have begun working as assistants as the ritual services have started being paid in cash but do not challenge or break the caste hierarchy in actual life.

While women are largely excluded in the decision-making processes and key roles prior to the ritual, on the main day of the ritual, women and girls engage in “traditional women work” like cleaning the house, arranging a spacious room and essential materials such as folded blanket, ghee, garlands (hand made with flowers and petals by children), *gomutra* (cow urine), *sagarh* (sacred fire around which mediums dance), ghee, tongs, and *dhol* (two-sided drum). Just prior to ritual, while women are seen in the kitchen making tea and food for the ritual initiators (who can take it after the ritual) and family, the male members gather in the ritual space welcoming and talking with the medium(s) and ritual initiators.

⁴ Handful of white rice grains through the medium the medium is regarded to witness and understand, thereafter confirms the relation of the affliction. White substances such as rice, curd and ghee are regarded as pure and thus cannot the impurity.

⁵ The *das* is a guru (teacher) of the deities; he mediates communication between the devotees and the deity in the form of questions, *jagar gathas* (ritual stories which are sung in the praise of the deity).

⁶ One who assists the *das* in drumming. He usually drums from one of the sides using two wooden sticks referred to as *damau*. Both *das* and *shyatt lagane wala* work in a team to produce a particular rhythm to invoke a particular deity.

When all arrangements are made with placing the sagarh centrally and key participants (medium, ritual initiator and organizer) adorn their dhotis, lamp, and incense are lit, the viewers begin gathering in the room marking gendered spatial boundaries. The men viewers who are usually the first ones to enter the room occupy the more comfortable spaces on one end of the room. The women and girls (where I also sat and observed all the rituals from) are scooped together near the opposite end usually where the main entrance is.

Thereafter, the ritual organizer,⁷ who is a male family member of the afflicted person sprinkles little gomutra in all the directions two times signifying the purification of the place. While the das induces the ritual by drumming on a slower beat, the medium is seated on a folded clean blanket with his hands joined together placed on his forehead in meditation (Figure 1). The ritual organizer in this instance offers garlands and incense (made from a mixture of shrub's leaves, ghee, and a lit coal on top) in circles to the medium, his dulej⁸, the ritual initiators as well as drum (Figure 2). While the das transitions to a faster, more exciting style in which he alternately declaims, the medium in meditation begins shaking and trembling. This very moment is regarded as the entrance of the divine spirit to the body of the medium. The deity announces his arrival by greeting the das first, followed by the other deity(s) and then offers rice grains to the sagarh and touches his forehead to it which symbolizes offering respect and seeking blessings.

The medium moves around the sagarh and reaches to his throne where the rice grains are kept in a plate and picks some grains to throw towards the ritual initiators to slow down the pace of drumming. In this instance, the deity speaks through the medium his story of where he/she came from in his language of origin or vernacular Kumauni which I have personally never seemed to have understood in all these years of watching the ritual. This language exclusion did not only apply to me but most of my

⁷ In jagars, the ritual organizer is a male member, who is referred to as a saukaar whereas in temples they are called as siyodi. The latter are not just ritual organizers but also have the sole right to light the diya or lamp of the deity.

⁸ It is regarded as the throne of deity made with a clean folded blanket, a plate of rice grains, offerings (flowers and coins).

participants (except the das and some men) who mentioned that they did not fully or partially fathom what was being said. After the completion of narration, the ritual initiators continue to drum in a faster beat. The deity signals using the grains again, here the afflicted person is asked to come ahead and sit in front of the deity. The latter in some cases may begin shaking and shivering (can turn ferocious in some instances), the deity commands it to speak and various kinds of communications and negotiations take place at this moment. The das, who acts as a mediator praises the deity, apologizing or agreeing on behalf of the family and enquiring the deity about the afflicted person's condition. The divinity then narrates the entire episode of the cause of the illness or disease, informs when the next ritual can be organized and then the deity blesses him or her with ash approved by the das from the sagarh. This is followed by the deity offering all the viewers ash on the forehead. The das or bard plays a short repeat of the deity's song, the deity dances one last time and then finally departs.

This analysis of home rituals highlights the liminal moment of 'caste inclusion' and 'gender ambiguity' in the possession ritual which I argue does not impact the discrimination against low-caste individuals or the social denigration experienced by women in everyday life. In the former, the upper-caste mediums physically embrace or bow down to seek blessings of the lower caste das. From his position of guru of deities, he "decides the tempo and length of the ceremony, direct its various phases, give orders to his clients and supervise the enactment of all the rituals which are incorporated within jagar" (Quayle 1981, 115-16). The moments of gender ambiguity include the embodiment of female deities by men mediums and vice-versa such as Devi (female deity) is embodied by Bhawan Ram. During trance, the Devi can be clearly identified as Bhawan Ram adorns a red shawl on his head partially covering his face. Red is regarded as a color of fertility and red-colored attire is worn by a Hindu woman on her day of marriage. Such liminal moments of gender ambiguity in possession although involves forms of gender subversion by questioning and crossing over the traditional notions of

masculinity and femininity, this subversion of gender identity involves reinforcing gender roles (Urban 323). Moreover, the performers return to their ascribed gender roles towards the end of the ritual (ibid). Likewise, Smith refers to them as “an act of social subversion as well as an act of social confirmation” (2006, 58) in which possession strengthens socially or politically the individual or group while also presenting itself as a response to oppression. However, it is not truly counter-hegemonic nor an exclusive mode of cultural communication (Smith 2006, 57). The liminal moments in my case of deity possession rituals are not “subversive,” in that it does not challenge or transform caste and gender hierarchies in a sustaining or radical manner. This claim is also evidenced by Turner’s argument that liminal period results in the emergence of “society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated” (1969, 360) *communitas*.

Furthermore, most religious rituals and events are exclusive to men as the latter is regarded to have the right to worship the deities” in the study village. Deity possession rituals are largely exclusionary to women in comparison to Hindu religious events called *baghpat* where Vedic scriptures are read by Brahmin Priests organized in the local temples. Women in these events have only been welcomed to participate in the last decade as viewers or even highlight their “presence” as devotees (especially women whose husbands are participating as devotees) however, it is exclusive to upper castes (*thakurs* and *Brahmins*). Besides, the main activities that devotees undertake such as lighting the deity’s lamp, making logistical arrangements, serving tea, and *prasad* to viewers and the priests are performed by men devotees rather than women. The *homa* site ceremony in *baghpat* is considered incomplete without the presence of women as mentioned by *Nirmala* and *Bimla*. The authority of men is prominent in both events especially in divine form of possession as the ritual initiators, organizers or devotees, and mediums. Women on the other hand, showcase their mere ‘presence,’ as viewers or mostly as possessed dancers who are undergoing afflictive forms of possession. This male dominance

has also been highlighted in other ethnographic research studies in Uttarakhand (Anand 2006) and women's exclusion in decision-making processes for treatment will further explored through the case studies of Nirmala and Ruchi. The reason behind choosing their cases is to also discuss their positionalities as a wife and daughter respectively which determines the access to resources and level of marginalization.

Case Studies of Afflictive state of Possession

Nirmala

I came across Nirmala for the first time in August 2018 and interviewed her again in April 2021. She and her husband, Pujan Singh are both farmers and live in the center of Supi village with a son and a daughter. I stayed with this family for about a week in 2018 and when I told her about my research on possession, she offered to share her experience with me. The account presented below is based on what I heard from Nirmala, Pujan Singh and Rama Devi (her neighbor) which I have attempted to bring together.

First event of Possession

After Nirmala got married, she shifted from her natal home in Almora district to Supi village in Nainital district with her husband's joint family. The family belonged to an upper caste thakur and khasa community (who were landowners) and consisted of her father-in-law, her husband's two brothers including their wives and 5 children in total. Her first episodes of possession began when she lived with her joint family. She would often experience moments when she would undergo relentless pain in the back and become nauseated even during working in the fields. After a male member of her family put a dot on her forehead using the ash (vibhooti) and made negotiations to search and fulfill the wishes of the possessing spirit, she would be able to restore her health. Her family was quite reluctant to conduct a jagar for her, as a result, her health started deteriorating which began with losing weight, weakness, and

irregular and early menstruation. After her first daughter, she could not get pregnant for almost 8 years. When her husband organized a jagar for her, the possessed medium revealed that the spirit possessing her was from her natal home.⁹ Nirmala's neighbor and friend, Rama Devi told me during my visit to her home this year, "Nirmala di (sister) embodied a deity from her natal home (mait). She would so beautifully dance during the temple ritual; her long and voluminous hair would loosen and untie on its own. But her family did not conduct any jagars at home to know about the deity or establish a place for the deity. As a result, she has become very weak, thin, and often becomes sick. She was so healthy when she was a bride. You should talk to her as well" (in-person talk, April 2021). Nirmala along with her husband and father-in-law travelled to her natal home where they organized prayers, offered two goats in her natal home's temple to drop off and honor the possessing agent and this prasad was distributed amongst the villagers.

Second event of Possession

After a couple of years, the joint family broke into nuclear families and Nirmala shifted with her husband, children, and father-in-law to another house. Nirmala began experiencing similar episodes of afflictions at her new house. Once she suddenly experienced relentless pain in her back and legs and nauseated while working on the field one afternoon. Gathering all her strength she attempted to walk back to her home, but she felt very weak and thirsty. She decided to stay at her sister-in-law's house and rested for a while there mentioning that she was not feeling well. Her sister-in-law offered her water and after some time her niece helped her to reach her home where only her father-in-law was present. Her niece cooked her food and returned home. Her condition was worsening as her hands and feet got twisted. She asked her father-in-law who was sitting outside with his neighbor to come inside and put a vibhooti (ash from the fire) on her forehead. After that episode she became quite well and started doing

⁹ A medium for the ritual is chosen based on the healing effect on the afflicted person. If a person's condition does not improve, the person's family network will consult another medium.

her housework. When her family organized a jagar at their home, it was found that it was linked to an ancestral female spirit with a child who was killed, and her death rituals were not observed. The medium also revealed that all the members of their family network (kabil) would have to get together to begin the process. Such situations usually take several months because there are tensions and disagreements amongst families in the network. Amidst this, Nirmala and one of her sisters-in-law were undergoing health issues and had afflicted and similar symptoms, the affliction resulted in extreme dizziness, headache, stomachache, and a loss of appetite.

“I even went to hospitals for health checkups such as ultrasounds, urine tests, and x-rays. All the results for these reports were normal. I was all fine when I was in the city for the medical checkup. However, when I returned to my village, I became sick. When my condition worsened, a jagar was organized at my sister-in-law’s house (Lanepokhra, Supi) from where a black goat was offered to spirit. Some members of the village who are not part of the family make this sacrifice in the place mentioned by the possessing agent who can eat the meat and the rest must be buried. After some months, another jagar was organized at our ancestral family home in Kiror (Supi) from where we went to Haridwar in establishing a small female statue in Haridwar’s temple (the city from where the river Ganga flows which is regarded as a holy river for Hindus). I have been doing well since that day and everything else is going well as well.” (in-person interview, 2021)

Ruchi

I was referred to meet Ruchi through an acquaintance in 2019 and told that she had lately recovered through possession. She holds a bachelor’s degree from a public university in Haldwani and currently lives with her parents in central Supi. I visited her house one afternoon, and the following description entails her story as she told me.

Ruchi suffered from severe attacks of chest and stomachache for almost a year (2018-2019). She described the pain as “unbearable and unrelenting” and that made her “dizzy and nauseated all the time.”

Given her critical condition, Ruchi's family members rushed her to the hospital in the city. This had no positive impact on her body rather it further deteriorated her health. At first, her family members and especially her elder brother (who is a soldier in the Indian Army) were reluctant and refrained from approaching the medium/healer and continued to wander around other hospitals for treatment. One morning, when she reported unusual symptoms such as lactation (without being pregnant) and rectal bleeding along with severe attacks of chest and stomachache. Although this could have been because of the heavy medication Ruchi was put on, her aunts and neighborhood women urged her parents to seek cure from the local deities.

Ruchi mentioned to have sought treatment from all the well-known doctors in the region, however, their treatment and medication did not cure her illness. She reported to have undergone five blood tests and two ultrasound examinations, but all the results showed that her condition was normal. When she was informed about unusual symptoms, an invitation was sent to the local medium to perform a jagar at home by her father. During this jagar, the deities explained the reasons behind her deteriorating condition as Ruchi retold,

It was the first jagar and the deity narrated that I accidentally crossed chal (spirits living in rivers). As a result of which my health was deteriorating day by day. The deity gave a time frame within which my family and I were asked to organize another jagar for the cure of the problem. My condition was better during this time frame given by the deity and even lactation and rectal bleeding stopped within the first 15 days. We had to arrange certain materials such as an unused piece of cloth, legumes, and a black hen (animal sacrifice) for the second jagar ritual. Since all these materials were demanded by the spirit possessing me, it was essential to bring all of them to the ritual (in-person interview, 2019)

After the second jagar ritual, Ruchi's condition did not seem to improve. It was the final jagar, (also known as 'jagar for happiness (hashyoni jag)') where the deity discusses the improvement regarding the condition of the afflicted person, and it was revealed that the animal sacrifice was not

conducted using ‘the appropriate and assigned’ methods. The deity urged them to reorganize the second jagar or the healing ritual. After reorganizing the last two deity invoking rituals, Ruchi was able to regain her health. Although she discontinued the use of medicine during the entire period of ritual healing, she consumed some calcium pills and liquids to gain strength and complete recovery. This entire experience according to her has changed her perception regarding jagar rituals since previously she too was reluctant to participate in it.

The two accounts of Nirmala and Ruchi help us understand how their affliction brings them in the realm of divine possession which is socially/culturally valued but at the same time the process is not devoid of male authority and patriarchy. It is highlighted on several occasions such as when Nirmala requests her father-in-law to put a vibhooti on her forehead or the decision to switch from biomedicine to ritual or vice-versa. As evident in the two cases, the final decision whether to organize a jagar or use biomedical help was taken by the male members of the family, husband, brother, or father rather than the afflicted person/woman. Besides, the decision to organize the ritual is rather bureaucratic with the involvement of several members (senior women, neighbors, or close kin) than a sole decision of the afflicted woman. Such behavioral patterns have also been observed in the Nepalese societies where the community members with “their attitudes, inclinations and resources of a diverse kinship network can cause actual help seeking behavior to differ from the attitudes and preferences expressed by the patients” (Durkin-Longley 1984, 870). The ritual process excludes women in several levels but rendering the involvement of men as valid, necessary, and a divinely ordained right has the highest impact as it contributes to the continuity of the patrilineage.

In contrast, there have been some economic transformations in jagars for instance, the costs of travelling to several places as mentioned by the medium and the payment to the ritual initiators has not only increased but paid in cash instead of food items like grains. Although the mediums must refrain

from taking any material benefits from the house of ritual organizer except for white substances (which are believed to not transmit inauspiciousness), some of them demand the ritual organizers to manage them food and drinks outside the house. One jagar today costs between \$15-\$100 or more. As a result of their increased economic and symbolic value along with afflicted families' poverty, thus, a decreased tendency to organize a jagar in general. The impact of monetization on ritual has been noted by Geertz in Javanese village and other scholars like Simpson who during his revisit to the fieldsite in Sri-Lanka in 1995, observed a great reduction in the production and consumption of healing and exorcism rituals because of increased monetary charges. The people did not have money to spend on large-scale rituals (1997, 51).

Although both Nirmala and Ruchi belong to upper-caste families, their positionality in their social context is different especially from a men's perspective which affects their access to healing services. While Nirmala is a wife, Ruchi is a daughter/sister. Grey (1982) from his research amongst Chetri women in Nepal employs the notion of "status ambiguity" where men's perspectives locate two categories of women. First includes daughters and sisters (including out-married daughters, cheli-beti), who are fertile, but their sexuality cannot be initiated by men. Second category includes wives who are both fertile and sexual. The latter are regarded as strangers who should religiously follow hierarchical terms within families. Such categorization is also found in Kumaon, where daughters like Ruchi can access material resources more easily than wives within a short timeframe. Moreover, Nirmala in her second afflictive spirit attack had to receive the consensus and involvement of her entire family network which is usually very challenging given Nirmala's daughter in-law status and the rising nuclear families with interpersonal social and economic tensions in Kumaon which makes bringing families together on matters of affliction difficult. The discussion on the themes of social change and exclusion will be continued in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 ‘Exclusion’ in Becoming a ‘woman medium’

Rama Devi

In April 2021, when I paid a visit to a former participant and divine medium, Himmat Singh to inquire about future jagars in the village, I got an opportunity to communicate with his wife, Rama Devi who kindly welcomed me to her kitchen. Through our casual conversations about my research on possession, online education and covid, at one point she narrated her experience of possession by Ganganath deity from natal home as below.

“During that time, I was married with two sons and three daughters. My children and I became very sick with jaundice. I went for treatment to several places, but it did not heal. I then learned about a healer and medium from Mukteshwar (neighboring town), who offered shrub twig for the oracular treatment.¹⁰ During one of my visits, there was a jagar ritual being conducted. As I heard the sound, I began dancing and trembling. The same healer put some sacred ash on my forehead and informed that the possessing agent was Ganganath deity from my natal home. My family organized two jagars where my husband (who embodies our family deity) and another medium were invited to perform. During the ritual, the deities negotiated with Ganganath (embodying me) saying that they could not worship him because my family were devotees (priests) of Saim and Harith. After several negotiations and persuasions, Ganganath I think would have agreed to leave my body because my children and I became well.”

The accounts of possession documented in this research are although subjective experiences of women, they highlight certain common patterns of exclusion that connect one possession experience to another and the wider community in which they happen. Some studies in the Indian context on women’s exclusion from possession rituals includes Ram’s exceptional ethnographic study in rural Tamil Nadu

¹⁰ It is locally referred to as jharu-phoonk (blowing and brushing)

which argues that female mediums occupy the lowest positions when viewed through Bourdieu's "field of power," here the subfield of traditional medicine (2013, 252). Out of the female mediums, the catholic mediums were "most singularly disadvantaged group of mediums" having no access to the support from Church as compared to Dalit Hindu mediums who inherited knowledge from their father (ibid, 253-54). In a similar vein, Sax's study from the Garhwal Himalayas (North India) includes a detailed account of the experience of a high caste woman medium referred to as Gaurja Mai. Her family in particular, the male members were upset and angry at her for performing the ritual and claimed that "people like us [i.e., high-status people] don't dance—why are you dancing? You've shamed us [literally, "cut our noses"]" (2002, 11).

In addition, possession rituals in Uttarakhand are largely recognized as a religious ritual of "landed elites and upper caste men" but involve both "sociopolitical exclusion and inclusion" where in the former, certain subjects are excluded to delineate the boundaries of the village community (Jassal 2016, 8). For instance, women after marriage are regarded as "outsiders" (in relation to their natal home) and therefore unable to participate fully—and authentically—in the ritual" (ibid). These studies quite clearly highlight that women's exclusion is informed by various social structures such as the politics of caste, gender, and religious and social norms. How my analysis contributes to this body of literature is by exploring "exclusion" through appropriating the "multiple-axis framework" of Crenshaw's intersectionality to study not only the impact of the social structures on women mediums and viewers' participation but also of socio-political transformations such as the rise of nuclear family system in rural communities in the last decades.

As a starting point, the definition of social transformation as proposed by Groenewald proves quite useful and according to him, "...to transform is to change in form or appearance, in condition, nature or character. The social is concerned with human beings in their relations to each other, their

living conditions, and living together in organized communities” (1999: 18). Moreover, Castles claims that social transformation occurs in response to economization, war, and political upheavals (Castles 1999, 1) and how they impact local and national communities either positively or negatively (ibid, 5), even impacts of social change on religion are either positive or negative (Nyang, 2010). Furthermore, Jerolimov et al. (2004) examined religion and social transformation, with particular emphasis on the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and its impact on Eastern and Central European religions and they are argued that social change is linked to religious changes. While I agree with the impact of transformations as pointed by the above scholars, the definition of Groenewald may not be applicable to this or the contexts where “supernatural” is important. It does not speak of the positioning of “other”-the divine agents, dead ancestors alongside humans. The socio-political transformations in the lives of women cannot be studied without the “Other,” the latter forms an important part of their lives in the phenomenon of possession.

I primarily focus on gender minorities (women medium and viewers) in possession rituals who are barred from attaining divine mediumship and those who become mediums face several restrictions and challenges imposed by the divine agents, mediums, ritual initiators and family and kin networks. I suggest that ‘exclusion’, ‘marginalization’ or ‘inequality’ combined with their disempowering impacts may take numerous forms depending on an individual’s position in social structures of caste, gender, ritual, and Hindu national identity and the impact of social, political, and economic change occurring at larger levels. They are “the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences” (Hankivsky 2014, 2).

Family and non-family deities¹¹: Difference in Valuation and Representation

¹¹ I am here examining the positionality of deities with respect to a married woman’s positionality.

In Kumaon, like in most of North India patrilocality is practiced where women after marriage permanently shift from their natal home (mait) to their husband and in-laws' place. The ritual of marriage confirms her status as an "outsider" in relation to her natal home by dissociation of social and religious threads such as death and birth pollution norms she once shared and observed with her natal home and kin although are later reconnected with her husband's family. A married woman "should cease worshipping the gods of her mait and begin to worship those of her sauryas." (Sax 2008, 78). In that case, while the deities of her husband's village community become her "family deities," the deities worshipped in her natal home and in some cases who may accompany her to her in-laws' village become "outsiders" or "non-family deities." While Sax (2008) observes this pattern of accompanying natal deities amongst women of lower caste women than high castes due to the former's extreme vulnerability, poverty, and discrimination call on their natal deities for help in times of crisis (2008, 79). This reasoning could be more specific to Sax's case because women in Kumaon irrespective of their caste and socio-economic status could be accompanied by a natal deity to their place of new residence after marriage. As the natal deities accompanying women after marriage are not worshipped or recognized by her husband's family or village community, women are restricted from assuming divine mediumship. In relation to this, a lower caste ritual initiator Suresh Ram mentioned:

"The family deities must be worshipped prior to other deities. It is not possible for anyone to just recognize other deities as theirs. Ganganath is only one such deity which incarnates in both men and women especially out-married daughters. However, in such a case, Ganganath must be dropped off to the place of its origin, where a temple could be constructed in his name. If it refuses to leave, further verbal negotiations will be made by the ritual initiators and the medium conducting the on behalf of the afflicted person and the family that if they are unable to worship one family deity, how could they worship two! Finally, he must be taken to its place of origin" (in-person interview April 2021).

This was well reflected in the case of Nirmala and Rama Devi, where their husbands and in-laws either negotiated or sent back the deities accompanying to their place of origin. Besides, the patrilocality does not just concerns the religious and social transformations in a woman medium's married life but more importantly, the exclusion from the 'cultural or religious lineage' which she cannot claim being an "outsider" to both her natal and in-laws family after marriage. This "religious lineage" or capital is important in ritual participation, performance and establishing the "authenticity" or garner social value as a medium. A man dancing during the ritual whose grandfather, father, or uncle were/are mediums of their family deity can claim a religious lineage may not be faced with patronizing comments of community members and be allowed to participate in deity's sacred fire by the das unlike women dancers. This also gives an opportunity for the former to learn expressions of possession from his family lineage through ritual participation and male members of the families easily get persuaded to inquire or organize a home ritual when it comes to possession in men. Similarly, the female medium, as Ram argues occupies the lowest positions when viewed through Bourdieu's "field of power," here the subfield of traditional medicine (2013, 252). They lack access to the cultural capital which is the inheritance of knowledge in a tradition unlike the male mediums, their "authorization to become mediums is initiated at random, as an unbidden form of possession" and they neither have a teacher nor do they leave a tradition through disciples (ibid, 253). This largely applies to Kumaon as well except that the women mediums here have the das as their teacher because divine forms of possession cannot be initiated in the absence of the das.

Furthermore, family deities which are locally referred to as "kul deities" are associated with the patrilineage meaning that former will always incarnate in the body of a male member (who is regarded as the carrier of the 'kul' or family lineage). This fosters a culture of disbelief towards women mediums (or those in a process of becoming one) and as a result are faced with harsh criticism such as like Tara

Devi during and after her performance was called doing “sorcery and black magic,” and that she was being “possessed by a ghoulish rather than a deity” by both men and women. Even Rajendra Prasad, who has been Tara Devi’s teacher or *das*, was told that he is paid by the latter to be her teacher to conduct sorcery. Some women, in case of Janki Devi or other women undergoing possession, without conducting any inquiry of the spirit they are embodying, in most instances are claimed/deemed to be fake, embodying negative spirits rather than a possibility of divine spirit by most members of the family.

On the other hand, women who are embodying deities belonging to their in-laws’ home are in some cases be able to assume mediumship with the consensus and collaborative recognition from the members of the family network which is not always welcome. For instance, Tara Devi is a medium embodying Ganganath from her in-laws place even though their family deity is Harithnath. Although in such cases women may be able to become mediums, they face several restrictions imposed by the divine mediums of their in-laws’ place and are often questioned for their authenticity. In another case, Janki Devi who embodies an ancestor deity is worshipped by her family and family network because the deity hails from her in-laws’ side. However, the ancestral deity occupies a ‘second position’ in relation to their family deity, Harithnath. Moreover, she has been instructed to practice her mediumship only within the realms of her family network by the male medium, Bhawan Ram who helped her in the initiation process.

The deities embodying women such as Ganganath (God of justice) and female divine spirits like Bhana, Devi, Jiya Rani and ancestral deities also occupy the lower and much contested positions in comparison to male deities embodied by men in my study village. Such narratives point out the sole subordination of femininity, through categorizing some deities as less powerful because they are embodied by women. For instance, Devi avatars in men mediums are regarded as more “authentic” than those in women mediums as mentioned by Suresh Ram. Moreover, in the local narratives of Ganganath

and Bhana, while the role and story of the latter is often overlooked, Ganganath is regarded as trivial or “inauthentic” compared to other family deities. The former is regarded to be worshipped only when out-married daughters are undergoing afflictive states of possession caused by angry spirits of ancestors or other dead people. This sub-ordination of femininity and women mediumship also takes through putting the deities embodied by women in conflict or opposition with the other local male deities embodied by men. According to a senior medium, Amar Singh which aligns with the narratives of most men and some women, “Gurugorakhnath, Saim, and harithnath have a rivalry with Ganganath for the latter transgressed sainthood by falling in love with Bhana Bamin. As a result, we do not have Ganganath temple in this village and it is constructed in the neighboring Kokilbana village. This is also the reason why Ganganath or bhana bamin cannot be worshipped in the village.” In contrast, most women participants mentioned Ganganath as the most benevolent deity who can be persuaded by offering just a flower. The mention of not establishing and worshipping a Ganganath temple in the village dismisses the deity’s presence in all the ways and questions the “authenticity” of women mediums embodying Ganganath.

Caste and gender-based patronization

The patronization is more commonly experienced by upper-caste women mediums whose families associate female medium’s expression of possession such as dance, trembling and shaking as shameful and embarrassing for their families’ status. One of my upper caste participants named Bimla Devi shared with me that her mother (who is now a medium of Devi) would undergo trembling, dancing and her hair would loosen on her own whenever there would be a deity possession ritual in temples or homes. To this, her aunts would often comment that “her mother is dancing crazily without any shame in front of her father-in-law and brother-in-law.” In upper-caste families, women mediums and viewers are required to maintain a ‘respectable conduct’ through not dancing or performing in the ritual. It can

also increase their exclusion vis-à-vis women mediums of lower castes. Even though the latter can claim some ritual authority as compared to upper-caste women, they face discrimination from the upper-caste categories.

Besides, anxiety and disgust associated with women's menstruation and sexuality has also kept women from entering main realms of the local temples, touch the place of sacred fire and assume priestship like a *siyodi*¹² and perform fully and "authentically" like male mediums in rituals. Views and norms related to menstruation are diversified across religions and within India itself. In Hinduism, it is regarded as "impure" (Chawla, 1992), or "polluted" (Apffel-Marglin, 1994) and in some place as a "curse" (Sharma, Vaid, & Manhas, 2006). In Kumaon, menstruation is regarded as a period of impurity. In Catholic laws, women's exclusion from altar server, Catholic priesthood and other liturgical roles has been linked with the generalized fear and disgust towards the former's menstrual cycle ordained by men (Welch 81, 1982; Ruether 1990). As mentioned by Suresh Ram, "married women and even their shadows should not be reflected on our family deities because that would cause impurity, or some tragedy will occur in the village." In rural Kumaon, the practice differs across villages, in my study village particularly, the norms of impurity and seclusion are applied only to married women, which lasts for 5 days and terminates immediately thereafter. The married women are regarded as "untouchables" during their menstruation as mentioned by the ritual initiator, Suresh Ram, a term also used to refer to lower castes. While married women on their menstruation seclude and distance themselves to refrain from impurifying anything or any person, other members of the family or village physically distance themselves from the former to maintain their purity. The latter if they come in contact (un)intentionally, the latter can revive through sprinkling *gomutra* on their hands or the object. As menstruation is one of

¹² The latter are organizers/maintainers of the temples. They are responsible for conducting the deity possession rituals or other Hindu rituals in the temples. They collect the offerings of the devotees and provide the *prasad* (blessed food/flowers) to the devotees on important occasions such as local festivals, *jagar* rituals or even during some Hindu rituals like *baghpat* (refers to the occasion when the Hindu scriptures are read by a Brahmin priest and scholar).

the periods of pollution such as menstruation along with pregnancy, birth, and death in a household (natuk-shutuk), a male medium or a man whose wife is undergoing menstruation would also abstain from conducting a jagar or engaging in religious practices and spaces. Even families undergoing periods of birth and death should also abstain from engaging in religious rituals and practices.

Impact of nuclear families, Hinduism, and Hindu nationalism

According to Geertz argument, population growth and other changes like “urbanization, monetization, occupational differentiation, and the like, have combined to weaken the traditional ties of peasant social structure; and the winds of doctrine which have accompanied the appearance of these structural changes have disturbed the simple uniformity of religious belief and practice characteristic of an earlier period” (1957, 37). Geertz also notes that the rise of religious nationalism and Islamic reform as ideologies in the Javanese society affected both urban lives and smaller towns and villages. This also applies to the Indian context where the rise of the nuclear family system has posed several challenges to women in receiving a cure for an afflictive form of possession (either by divine or negative spirits) as the latter necessitates the contribution and collaboration of all members (especially male) in the family network (kabil). A kabil consists of approximately 20-30 nuclear families who once used to be one family sharing resources, periods of natuk-shutuk, and descent like kin. However, today only the family deity worship has retained because they occupy a somewhat permanent place and breaking the relationship with deity will result in the latter’s rage on the person as well as the village. Today, the families worship the same family deity, even though the birth and death pollution threads have disintegrated due to the rising population in the kabil and breaking into nuclear families. Today, the periods of pollution are observed by individual nuclear families only for their immediate families sharing close blood ties. Various kinds of interpersonal disagreements and tensions exist in a family network, for instance ‘x’ family may refuse to participate for ‘y’ family because the latter may have

previously refused former's request in ritual participation, existence of economic tensions especially relating to land or the fear of disclosing the secrets by the deity. Another simple reason could be a lack of belief and disinterest in the ritual or religious worship. This may take several months of persuasion of the refusing families as evident by Janki Devi's case, where it took four months for her family to bring to their other families together for the first home ritual. The collaboration of family members (particularly of the male members) appears to be one of the most challenging tasks to achieve for women considering their low status within families and the family network.

The growth of influence of Hindu nationalist organizations such as Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and Bajrang dal in North India has further contributed to the social reproduction of patrilineage upper-caste authority of the ritual and thus, enhancing the exclusion of women. As mentioned before, in my study village, the priestship, the roles of ritual organizers or maintainers of most family or Hindu temples are assumed by the socio-economic elites- individuals who are male, landed, upper-castes specifically Pithoriyas and Mehtas who are also members or supporters of Hindu nationalist organizations. The lower castes have access to temples of their family deities who can only be worshipped by male members of the family. The Hindu nationalist organizations such as BJP and its parent organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) primarily focused on maintaining a Hindu religious identity and an upper caste and upper-class partnership (here, the upper caste ritual organizers) has provided central support to Uttarakhand (containing the Kumaon region) in the processes of state separation and formation in the 90s while garnering dedicated voters from the state (Mishra 2000, 8) specifically the rural regions.

Badri Narayan, a professor of social anthropology at the University of Delhi, characterizes Hindu nationalism as a strain of "cultural nationalism ... based on the moral and cultural code preached by the ancient Hindu religious epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (Narayan 2009, 8)." This is well

reflected in the village as the temple of some Hindu deities like Hanuman, Shiva has been quite recently built (around 2004-2005) in proximity with local deities such as Saim and Devi (Figure 3). There is a temple of Ram located in the auditorium of Digarh (Supi), where the Hindu mythology, Ramayana is dramatized, enacted, and spectated annually during the night by the village community members. Besides, wall tiles with inscripted images of Hindu deities like Durga, Shiva-Parvati, Vishnu have been attached on the local (village) temple gates, calendars with imprints of Hindu deities are hung on the walls of many homes even outside walls of many homes. The small temples established in most homes include the status of Hindu deities. Along with the rich imagery, there are symbolizations and appropriations of local deities which is central to the symbolism of Hindu nationalism (Narayan 2009). The prominent saint village deities, Saim and Gurugorakhnath were mentioned as incarnations of Shiva. On the other hand, Harithnath and Gopichandra incarnate Vishnu and Brahma, respectively. While the Hindu male deities Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu along with their symbolic partners occupy powerful positions both in Hinduism and deity possession rituals. Devi on the other hand, is celebrated both as a Hindu and village deity. Both Brahmin and Hindu events called Baghpat, and possession ritual are organized at Devi temple, and it has a place for sacred fire as well as a homa site.

The imagery, positionality, and symbolism of Hindu deities stands somewhat apart in the actual religious valuation and practice. This is well illustrated in the words of a medium, Birendra Singh mentioned,

“Hindu gods are different from the village deities here. There are differences between the two, the latter are family deities, ancestral. Gods like ram, Hanuman are usually worshipped by different communities. Some communities worship Ram and others worship Hanuman for example. They are recognized and worshipped les here. Today everyone is worshipping them as well earlier there were only family deity temples. They (Hindu deities) were worshipped in this village later; earlier family deities were worshipped. The temple Hanuman is not the same as family deity temple. The family deities do not have a form “like a wind”

represented by mainly their lamp and instruments in contrast Hindu deities are represented in status or idols with human characteristic. The statue of Hanuman has been established by a wealthy policeman from another town. During Diwali, the entire nation worships Ram, the village also does it. But they are not worshipped at other times in the village like during home or temple rituals (in-person interview 2021).

The “difference” pointed out by Birendra Singh portrays not only the higher positioning and valuation of family deities also but stresses the valuation of normative structure of ritual or local sacred spaces. It highlights the continuity of male authority in sacred spaces of family deities and women mediums and viewers negligible participation and performance.

In both the chapters, I have analyzed the multidimensionality of “exclusion” in the phenomenon of possession as experienced women mediums and viewers. It is not only informed by the interconnection of two or more social structures but also the factors of wider socio-political or economic changes such as economization of ritual, influence of Hinduism and Hindu nationalism and the rise of nuclear families. This shows that a ritual not only undergoes social reproduction but also social change. The impact of the social on the possession ritual are gendered as it complicates the process of seeking cure for women and social reproduction of male and upper-caste dominance.

Chapter 3 Women's agency in Deity Possession Rituals

In deity possession rituals, the upper-caste, Hindu nationalist, and male-dominated hierarchical structure excludes women from access to entry to the main realms of the temples, become ritual organizers and priests and perform as divine mediums in possession rituals in temples/homes on the belief that menstruation will pollute the deities, temples, and the ritual. Although there is obvious gender and caste politics linked to such misogynic notions of religious purity and pollution in these restrictions, most women uphold these exclusionary norms. This according to Abraham involves interconnection between religious indoctrination and gendered consciousness as a result “women tend to take male supremacy as a ‘natural order’ primarily because it is legitimized through religious mediation” (2019, 151). This serves to make a hegemonic impact by normalizing and justifying women's subordination as ‘divinely’ which cannot be questioned. In considering women's agency in such ritual practices, some scholars like Sax view it as resistance against the caste status and the divine agency. Such a view of possession as “resistance,” and “contest” negates women as agents who may endorse temple rituals and norms, resist patriarchy at personal and religious levels, and defend the religious system that excludes and marginalizes them. In my study context, women enter patriarchal bargains that covertly provide them access to resources and status and at the same time, they advance and preserve this patriarchal system of the ritual. Besides, women's agency does not manifest itself only in terms of strategizing, it also appears through their consciousness of their interests and marginalization cultivated through mediumship and possession.

Firstly, to understand why and how women and female mediums in Kumaon (North India) seem to support and abide by the ritual norms that dictate their exclusion and legitimizes their subordination to men, I employ Deniz Kandiyoti's theoretical concept of “patriarchal bargain. Kandiyoti argues about societies like India, China, and the Middle East, women “strategize within a set of concrete constraints”

that define “a patriarchal bargain” which she refers to as a “set of rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated” (1988, 275, 286). Shankar and Northcott (2009) claim that women support patriarchal practices and structures in exchange for long-term benefits like protection or autonomy which may differ according to class, caste, religion, and ethnicity. These patriarchal bargains not only shape women’s gendered subjectivity and gender ideology depending on the context but also influence both the “potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance” in their oppression (ibid). Moreover, this does not concern “false consciousness” rather the possibility of threats to short-term interests such as loss of protection for some women (Molyneux 1985, 234 cited in Kandiyoti 1988, 282-83). Their passive resistance takes the form of claiming protection in exchange for submissiveness and propriety.

Mukhopadhyay and Seymour argue that in India men occupy a central position within families due to the patrifocal family structure and ideology. This confines women to the private sphere while providing men central authority within family and over women (1994). Similarly, due to men’s central authority in rituals and sacred spaces, the homes become an arena of women and femininity in Kumaon. In this vein, El-Or (1993) claims that women undergoing extreme forms of modesty within conservative religious groups, the home is constituted as the main arena of femininity. The focus here on how the “home” allows for new forms of women’s agency within conservative religious groups is especially important to the analysis of women medium and participant’s agency in a context of a ritual structure dominated by male, Hindu nationalist upper caste elites. Thus, women mediums and viewers engage in negotiating within the ritual or sacred spaces through employing the realm of home. This chapter demonstrates that women and female mediums in deity possession rituals strategize to advance their

social and religious interests such as maintaining their caste status while contributing to the sustenance and maintenance of dominant social structures of power such as the ritual, caste, and gender.

Women Mediums and Viewers' Negotiations

The ritual organizers and divine mediums are upper caste landed male elites, commanding respect, and status. The possibility of being awarded and transferred this honor, status and sacred blessings to them and their families through their husbands or other male members of the family provides an additional incentive for women to work hard and make sacrifices by working in agricultural fields and taking care of homes, children, and the elderly. During my participant observation in 2021 at Himmat Singh's house, a prominent male medium, his wife, Rama Devi mentioned, "it is his (husband) good karma as a medium and the deity's blessing that everything is going well in our family. We are not hungry; we have home and clothes to wear." Besides, for most women, the exclusion experienced in temples and rituals is justified by their ability to become part of those holy activities as mentioned by Paruli devi in a group interview. "If there is some discrimination in some places, there should be. It is nice, even if one member of the family network becomes a ritual organizer or devotee. This devotion would be on behalf of the whole family as well as the entire village rather than just one person. It would be for everyone." The blessings he would receive would be transferred to all the members of the family including the wife.

Additionally, when men of the house are busy in preparations for the temple possession rituals, and other religious events, women enjoy a temporary position as the head of the households particularly in families which are nuclear and without a senior women's leadership. On such occasions, specifically in the absence of their husbands, women from neighboring homes come together to talk about their mundane lives and get some relaxation. Moreover, although women are prohibited to light the lamp in

local temples or access the main realms, home prayer rooms allow women to express their religiosity and devotion especially during religious rituals and events.

Moreover, women and female mediums (who are also wives) view themselves as carrying the responsibility of maintaining this honor of their families, mainly through following ritual norms restricting their participation and performance. The honor of the family is considered important in North India and is also associated with women's modesty particularly in upper-caste families (Derné 204). The upper-caste prestige and purity is preserved through curbing women's independent mobility and participation in rituals. As a result, most upper caste women may adhere to the restrictions of ritual norms for greater respectability, piety, and to differentiate themselves from lower caste women and women from other villages. For instance, upper-caste medium, Janki Devi said, women in some other villages during religious events and rituals inappropriately move around the temples without taking a fast and permission from the devotees there who also seem to be careless in not saying anything. She further stressed that women from her village do not engage in such behaviors rather ask devotees to make offerings on our behalf. This depicts how upper caste women take pride in their positioning and as a result adhere to patriarchal controls such as restrictions on their mobility in temples and participation in rituals.

Some women mediums and viewers may participate in exclusionary norms in temples or rituals for them to survive as opposition or resistance can expose them to stigma, threat, and seclusion in the community. Such forms of bargain have been defined as simulation, a conscious choice made by women to depict false compliance to prescribed gender norms in view of some personal benefits or to protect themselves from the possible negative consequences (Abraham 2019, 170-71). This is well demonstrated by a female medium, Tara Devi as mentioned who like others seem to be cooperating with the structures of their own dominion and in doing so, they are exercising power to their advantage.

“When I visited Devi and Saim temples. I went through two of the entrances, but I did not go through the third entrance of the temple because I as a woman do not have the right. When there are rules which are recognized such as restrictions on women’s entry to the main realm of the temple, then we must follow or abide by them. Otherwise, people will criticize, stigmatize, and even spread rumors such as, “x person’s wife has entered the temple, as a result a snake has come, or a tragedy has happened.” Such rumors would be spread across the village. However, if a woman is visiting a temple after cleaning, bathing, and fasting [purity], how can a snake come considering this? When she is going to the temple following the norms, why would a snake come? Men on the other hand, are conducting prayers while being drunk” (in-person interview, April 2021)

The narratives around a tragedy or snake are socially constructed and circulated by community members to keep women out of religious positions and participation. When I asked a senior male medium, Kishan Singh on what would happen if a woman went inside the temples, he said that some sort of pandemic such as an affliction would arrive and affect every person residing here, even though the mistake has been done by one woman.

Besides, women’s compliance to ritual norms coexists with a consciousness or awareness of gender bias in possession rituals and temples. Agency, in such instances, is “understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)” (Mahmood 2001, 206). Some works in this direction, include Boddy’s work amongst the zar cult in rural Sudan, “If possession ultimately cannot assuage women’s chronic subordination, it clearly works to cultivate awareness, feminist consciousness, in the possessed” (1989, 356). However, Boddy does not mention evidence of “feminist consciousness” as developed by the women undergoing zar possession. Besides, her analysis of feminist agency is articulated against the hegemonic male cultural norms of Arab Muslim (Mahmood 2001, 207) as she argues that zar possession serves as “a kind of counter-hegemonic process ... and the privileging of men

that this ideologically entails, that ultimately escapes neither its categories nor its constraints” (1989, 357). This does not fully apply to my case, although women mediums and viewers demonstrate a consciousness of their gendered oppression or inequality and their interests, they do not show a tendency to resist the system of domination in ritual. For instance, Tara Devi mentioned that gender exclusionary have been constructed by men and criticized the double standards of men in the worshipping of female deity, Devi during the ritual and their disrespectful and demeaning attitudes towards women mediums and viewers who symbolize the Devi avatar. In her words, “Men often make religious visits to vaishnav devi (female deity), or other x or y devi temple but they do not accept and respect the women of their households.” However, she does not express forms of resistance rather stresses on behaviors that abide the rules of temples and rituals for their personal safety and avoiding criticism.

This form of agency is not specific to Tara Devi rather is also portrayed by other women in my study village. The reason is not only based on women’s symbolic benefits but also because they lack consent and support from their village community and especially women combined with absence of civil societies that could work to promote awareness on gender equality. All male presence and engagement in the temples during rituals or other religious events makes just the thought of entering temples as an act of embarrassment for women because they lack any the support from their community and women to work collectively. This is reflected in the words of Paruli Devi and Janki Devi mentioned they mentioned during a group interview “Why would a woman go when there are men all around? Only the one who is not embarrassed will go! Even if there are 10 men and 4 women going to the temple, then it may look fine, and we may go as well. If rest of the women are staying at home but one woman is going to the temple. Isn’t she mad?” (in-person interview 2021). As a result, women mediums and viewers are exploring less risker arenas to exercise their agency and, in this way, more often, they appeal to the same agency that provides them symbolic benefits but at the same time, deprives them of their rights in ritual

participation and performance by the former's contribution to the maintenance of social structures of ritual.

Therefore, for women and female mediums, the key mode of social mobility is through becoming popular viewers of these rituals and transmitters of the knowledge about ritual norms that restrict their participation, more often than men seek cure for their illness caused through possession of a negative spirit and engage in the sacred activity through their husband's ritual participation or conduct prayers at home. If women seem to adhere and accept Hindu nationalist empowerment initiatives or endorse religious norms and narratives that exclude them from equal participation and opportunity, they are involving in strategies to negotiate with ritual patriarchy intertwined with gender and caste as described by Deniz Kandiyoti.

Conclusion

This research is an ethnographic exploration of the ritual's creation and maintenance of power and foster institutionalized exclusion of women mediums and viewers through its interaction with multiple social structures of power such as caste, gender, social and religious forms of patriarchy. The 'multidimensionality' of exclusion and marginalization of gender minorities, I have argued has been further complicated and reproduced with the social, economic, and political transformations specifically the monetization of ritual, rise of nuclear families and the influence of Hinduism and Hindu nationalism in North India. Moreover, the feminine imagery and symbolization of deities and liminal moments of gender and caste subversions neither challenges the low status and social denigration of women mediums and viewers in the ritual nor transform the caste and gender boundaries in sustaining manner. The phenomenon of possession thus can be regarded undergoing through both continuity (or social reproduction) as well as change (discontinuity) but never renders a radical liberation from social structures such as caste, gender and social and religious of patriarchy (Ram 2013). This does not mean that women mediums and viewers in the deity possession rituals in Kumaon lack agency, in fact, they possess consciousness of their interests and gender inequality in rituals and sacred spaces. They exercise their agency through strategizing for symbolic religious and social benefits through their home and the ritual realm while endorsing a ritual structure that fosters patrilineage and exclusivity of socio-economic male elites. This research has thus contributed through an analysis of an additional and understudied arena of "home" or household as a realm of femininity and a place to engage and process their negotiations.

Most importantly, while my analysis has focused on the impact of economization of ritual on women medium, an analysis of its impact on the lower caste ritual initiators could be pursued in the future. As lower caste categories have experienced many years of social and economic marginalization,

it would be interesting to examine how money paid in exchange for ritual service impacts their lives, the upper-caste criticism of their ritual authority and how this social transform the ritual. Besides, I would also like to explore how knowledge and skills of ritual initiators which is usually hereditary and lower caste linked are repositioned during a period of rapid social change that is through the engagement of upper-caste men as ritual initiators.

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Figure 1 Medium in meditation and his throne



Figure 2 Ritual organizer offering incense to Das and his drum during home jagar



Figure 3 Hanuman Temple (right) and Devi temple (left) with her sacred fire site and homasite



Figure 4 Das and his assistant in a temple ritual



Figure 5 Saim temple and inscribed image of Hanuman on the wall



Figure 6 Ritual organizers offering incense to men mediums in meditation and women viewers sitting behind



Figure 7 Ritual organizers in temple doing prayers

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