

Photo Essay

Worship in Transition: An Encounter with the Rājrajeshwarī Devī of the Garhwal Himalaya

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Abstract

The state of Uttarakhand in India is referred to as *dev bhūmi* (Land of the Gods) as it is home to several *devī-devtās* (local deities), sages, and *ṛṣis* whose presence renders the geography of this land a potent one. The soundscape of temples in Uttarakhand includes bells, chants, mantras, and *ḍhol-damauñ*, the latter referring to two rhythmic instruments which are used to facilitate divine possession. Kandara village is situated in Uttarakhand's Rudraprayag district where there is a temple of a goddess named *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* who is said to be a form of goddess *Durgā*. During the times of *Navrātri*, the nine forms of goddess *Durgā* are worshiped. It is also one of the times where various religious practices in conjunction with worship take place in the Garhwal Himalayan region. As a result, an older idol of the *devī* was replaced by a newer one during this time in the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* temple of Kandara village. Like in the case of the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī*, through her *naur* (representative/medium), the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* engages with her devotees and 'remembers' their problems and conflicts which she attempts to resolve if asked. Through these transactions, a strong intimate bond at the level of everyday living is formed with a deity. This photo essay aims to provide a closer peek into the realm of lived practices and traditions from the Central Himalayas and to document such experiences which often lie in the zone of orality. The worship of the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* holds not only a cathartic value but a protective function which she fulfills by ensuring good health and prosperity for the entire village.

Keywords

Rājrajeshwarī Devī; Kandara village; Garhwal Himalaya; dev bhūmi; Uttarakhand

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Worship in Transition

An Encounter with the Rājrajeshwarī Devī of the Garhwal Himalaya

Vineet Gairola and Shubha Ranganathan

Introduction

This photo essay documents a set of lived practices and traditions from the Central Himalaya, which often lie in the realm of orality. We describe the specific elaborate rituals and logistics involved in replacing the idol of *Rājrajeshwarī*, “the goddess of the king among kings,” with a new one. In 2020, the temple committee and village council decided to change the older *devī* idol that had been damaged in a fire in 2009. The villagers believed that replacing the idol with a newer one would ensure that the goddess *Rājrajeshwarī* continued to be honored and worshiped correctly. An elaborate *pūjā* of nine days was performed to install the new idol. Thus, an older idol of *Rājrajeshwarī* was replaced by a newer one in a process that lasted from October 6 to October 14, 2021. On the 10th day, that is, on October 15, 2021, sacrifices were organized for the *Bhairav* and *Khatkalinkā* (a form of *Kālī*) deities. Both are understood

to be companions of the *Rājrajeshwarī* and must be included in the worship ritual.

Rājrajeshwarī is a goddess who possesses the *pujārī* (priest) of her temple, and this possession by the deity (along with other deities) plays a central role in her worship practice. This photo essay discusses the significance of various deities in the temple complex of Rājrajeshwarī, including Bhutyor, Chaukrī, Khatkalinkā, and most importantly, Bhairav, whose presence and worship in any ritual action is crucial for the worship success. The fact that several deities accompany Rājrajeshwarī as part of the ritual is a significant feature here. Worshiping all the deities mentioned above is important for the worship to be regarded as complete. In Kandara village, villagers from all sections of the community pray to all the deities in tandem. Changing the idol of Rājrajeshwarī is a significant ritual that has

been studied and captured visually in this photo essay.

To define the field broadly, *dev bhūmi* (Land of the Gods) is the phrase used to refer to the state of Uttarakhand in India (Chandola 1977, Alter 2014; 2016), as well as the state of Himachal Pradesh (Halperin 2020) because these two states are home to several *devī-devtās* (local Hindu deities), sages, and *ṛṣis*. The Himalayan tsunami that struck Kedarnath in June 2013 was viewed locally as the *tāṇḍava* dance of Śiva, who “dances to destroy in order to make space for a new cycle of creation” (Whitmore 2018: 180), indicating that local beliefs and experiences bind deities to the natural world. Whitmore refers to it as “eco-sociality” (Whitmore 2018). Bells, chants, mantras, and *ḍhol-damauñ*, two rhythmic percussion instruments used to facilitate divine possession, make up the temple soundscape in Uttarakhand.

The temple of the goddess *Rājrajeshwarī* is in Kandara

village near the bank of the Mandākinī River. Kandara village is located in Uttarakhand's Rudraprayag district. *Rājrajeshwarī* is said to be a form of goddess *Durgā*. The “mountain religion” (Halperin 2020) is charged with the central worship of *devī-devtā* (Sutherland 2004), and the impact can be seen in the daily living practices of the Garhwali people. Moreover, the Great Goddess, namely *devī*, is a potent figure for Indians (Kakar 1997). The worship of *Rājrajeshwarī* also demonstrates how devotees, through their material, emotional, physical, ritual, and spiritual participation, add meaning to the event of idol change that takes place during *Navrātri* in the Ashwin month. In Hindu tradition, *Navrātri* is biannual and one of the most important worship practices dedicated to the goddess *Durgā* (see Hüsken, Narayanan, and Zotter 2021). The Hindu calendar places *Navrātri* in the months of *Chaitra* (April) and *Ashwin* (October–November). According to Prakash Chandra, one of the brahmins involved in the worship event and our interlocutor from Kandara village, there are two other lesser-known *Navrātri* festivals in the month of *Māgha* (January–February) *Āṣāḍh* (June–July) known as *gupt* (secret) *Navrātri*. *Navrātri* is a time when various religious practices take place in the Garhwal Himalayan region. The usual worship of *Rājrajeshwarī* during

Navrātri of *Chaitra* and *Ashwin* month includes only a small-scale *ārtī* performed daily by the *pujārī* before sunrise and after sunset. It does not include a sacrifice or any of the other extensive rituals discussed in this photo essay which describes an occasion when idol change occurred during the *Navrātri* of *Ashwin* month, that is, October 2021.

In terms of the idol change, the word “transition” denotes a dynamic movement involved in changing the idol of the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* because, in the event described here, the *prana pratiṣṭhā* ritual (denoting the establishment of a life force on an idol) was carried out. It also denotes how the “new idol” is perfused with the “old potency” through worship practices. “Transition” also involves a re-creation of sacred time (Leeuw 1958), where particular days in a year become the locus for ritual practice, as in the case of *Navrātri*. The event becomes an embodied experience (see Sax and Polit 2012) through the collective worship of *Rājrajeshwarī*.

The current *pujārī* (priest) Kamlesh Prasad has been living in the temple complex since 2015 (when he became the *pujārī* of the goddess). In the case of the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī*, through her *naur* (representative/medium), also referred to as *pujārī*, the *devī* engages with her devotees and resolves their concerns (if any) related to ill health and

family disputes. According to members of Kandara village and nearby devotees of the *Kedar Ghātī* (Kedar Valley), the worship of *Rājrajeshwarī* has a cathartic value and protective function as she is believed to ensure good health and prosperity for the entire village and her devotees. She is a deity who possesses the *pujārī* of the temple, and this possession is understood as one of her ways to interact with the village members and her devotees in the *Kedar Ghātī*. Whatever is spoken by her through the possessed *pujārī* is not in the ordinary consciousness of the *pujārī*. At the same time, ancestral knowledge is also relived through the collective worship of *Rājrajeshwarī*, as worshiping her collectively is a part of the tradition of the people from Kandara village, thereby becoming one of the techniques for attaining shared well-being.

The local deities share a relationship. For example, if *Bhairav* is not worshiped, the worship of *Rājrajeshwarī* is considered incomplete. The temple of the *Bhairav* is about 200 meters downhill from the *Rājrajeshwarī* temple. *Bhairav* is a form of Śiva who is believed to accompany *Rājrajeshwarī* whenever her *yātrā* (pilgrimage) is organized. Rather than being a consort, *Bhairav* is locally understood to be the protector deity who punishes the wrongdoer on behalf of *Rājrajeshwarī*. *Bhairav* guards *Rājrajeshwarī*'s territory, i.e., the entire

village, from evil forces and spirits. He is understood to be a god of justice who also helps remove afflictions (Sax 2003). *Bhairav* is worshiped and understood differently in different regions as “the Nepalese *Bhairav* differs from the many South Asian ‘demon devotees’” (Baltutis 2009: 27). The relationship between the deities tells us about the intuitive re-working of masculine and feminine forces, which are balanced through the worship practice by giving equal importance to the worship of the *Rājrajeshwarī* (feminine) and *Bhairav* (masculine). The continuity of worshiping them together can be understood as the divine nucleus of the higher Self of the devotee (see Zimmer 1946).

This visual documentation of replacing the idol and the worship practice of *Rājrajeshwarī* is as much about catching a glimpse of the “extraordinary” in between ordinary moments as it is about contributing to existing works on spiritual and cultural practices of the Himalaya. This photo essay captures the essence of the one-time worship of *Rājrajeshwarī* along with her companion deities, which includes the following elements: rhythmic music, establishing a new idol, performing *havan* (Vedic fire worship), animal sacrifice, and possession. The documented worship is not a regular/everyday

worship but a special one to mark the installation of a new idol of *Rājrajeshwarī*. Additionally, this photo essay highlights the importance of worshiping different deities together. We wish to thank the temple committee for granting the permission to take photographs, as well as the temple *pujārī* (priest) Kamlesh Prasad, the *dhol-damañ* players, the villagers for their time and generosity, and Prakash Chandra, the Kandara village resident without whom this work would not have been possible. All the photos were taken by Vineet Gairola in October 2021.



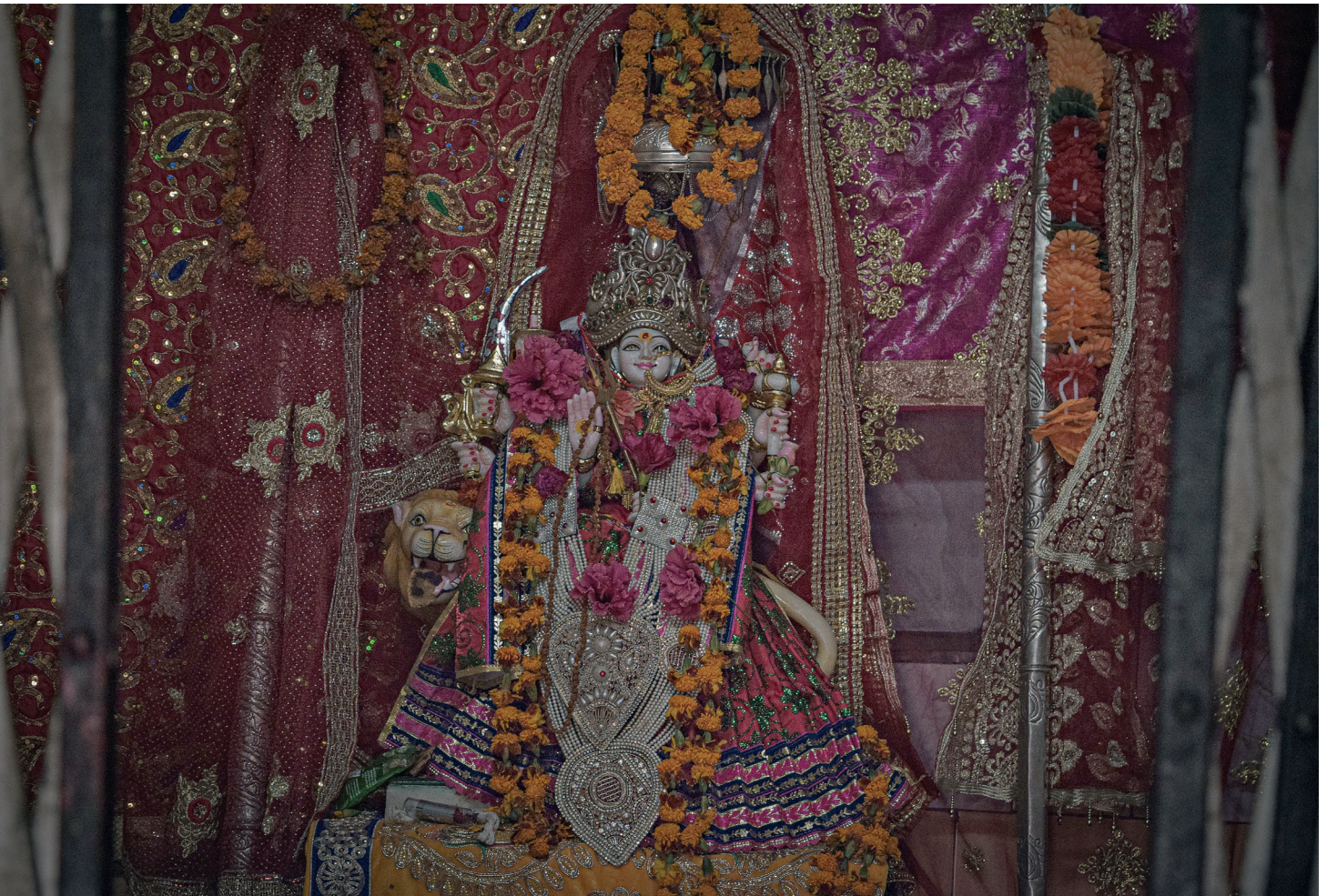
The Temple of *Rājrajeshwarī Devī*

The temple of *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* is located in the *Kandara gaḍ* of the Rudraprayag district of the Garhwal Himalayas in Uttarakhand. The *Kandara gaḍ* is one among 52 *gaḍ* or forts where the former kings lived and ruled in Uttarakhand. *Rājrajeshwarī* is said to be a form of the goddess *Durgā*. According to local legend, two hundred years ago (the exact date is not known), this place was ruled by a king named Hemchand. He owned a stone named *pāras patthar* (diamond) that could transform iron into gold. Moreover, he was the only king who did not ask his people to pay taxes. Instead, he asked for their worn-out farming tools, which he later turned into gold by touching them with his *pāras patthar*. His fort, the *Kandara gaḍ*, was attacked by the Nepalese Gorkhas once they learned of it. King Hemchand could not defend his fort and jumped into the Mandākinī River with his *pāras patthar*. According to the locals, Nepalis went to other regions in Garhwal as they were unable to retrieve the *pāras patthar* from Hemchand. However, according to Raturi (2020), the last king of *Kandara gaḍ* was Narvir Singh, who, after being defeated by the Panwar king, died drowning in the Mandākinī River. Because the king was devoted to the *devī*, his palace became a temple. She is therefore known as *Rājrajeshwarī*, “the goddess of the king among kings.”

The King and the *Pujārīs* (Priests) of the Past

Inside the temple is an idol of King Hemchand that serves as a reminder and symbol of the king's palace that preceded the temple. There are also framed photographs of three previous temple *pujārī* (priests) who experienced the divine embodiment of *Rājrajeshwarī Devī*. Their pictures, which show their lineage, are kept as a mark of respect and memory. Apart from these three *pujārī*, there were prior *pujārī* of the temple who were their forefathers. The *pujārī* follow a generational lineage and are known as *naur* (representatives of the *devī*). The *pujārī* of the *devī* experiences divine embodiment by her. It is the main criterion for becoming the *pujārī* of *Rājrajeshwarī*. After the death of a *pujārī* of the temple, a new person from the lineage is possessed by the *devī* during collective worship organized by the village. At present, the *pujārī* of the temple is Kamlesh Prasad. Durga Prasad, his younger cousin, was the *pujārī* before him (pictured to the extreme right). Durga's father, Basvanand, who can be seen in the middle of the three frames of the photo, served as the *pujārī* before Durga Prasad. Tara Dutt, his uncle (visible in the black and white frame of the above photo), served as the *pujārī* before Basvanand.





New Idol of *Rājrajeshwarī*

Rājrajeshwarī is usually worshiped through her *ārtī* every day in the morning and after sunset, and devotees visit the temple in between to make offerings and seek her blessings. To replace the older idol that was burned in a fire in 2009, this ritual action was organized during *Navrātri* (the nine nights of worship of the goddess *Durgā*). A series of steps are followed. Because photographing these steps is prohibited, they are described here. The entire process was performed by Prakash Chandra and Subhash Chandra, two Brahmins of the *devī*. With multiple mantras and offerings of milk, curd, ghee, honey, sugar, yellow sandalwood, and perfume, Prakash Chandra and Subhash Chandra, two devout Brahmins, begin the sacred process of purifying the new idol, known as *saklikaraṇ*. Second, Prakash Chandra bathed the idol in the holy waters of the Ganga. Third, the idol was kept in Ganga water for four hours in a process known as *jalādivās*. The idol is then placed in a copper vessel filled with wheat, rice, and pulses, a symbol of abundance and purity, as part of the *annadivās* ceremony.

It is believed that, through these elaborate rituals, the idol is transformed from a mere material to a “living being.” After that, the aforementioned grains are removed, and the idol inside the copper vessel is immersed together with fruits such as bananas, apples, grapes, pineapple, coconut, and pomegranate, a ritual known as *falādivās*. The copper vessel is then filled with ghee, and the idol is nestled inside, marking the *ghritādivās* ceremony. *Panchāmrit*, a mixture of ghee, milk, curd, sugar, and honey, is poured into the vessel as part of the *panchāmritadivās* ceremony. Flowers are added as the final offering, completing the *pushpadivās* ceremony. The idol of the *devī* is placed on a cotton mattress and left to sleep for a whole night inside the temple hall in a ritual known as *shaiyyadivās*. After three days of elaborate rituals and ceremonies, the older idol is replaced with the new one, and through the power of Vedic mantras, it is imbued with life, known as *praṇa pratiṣṭhā*. This represents the ancient tradition of establishing a new idol in Hinduism, turning it from mere matter into a living deity. With vibrant energy, the *praṇa pratiṣṭhā* ceremony begins. Mantras are chanted as each part of the goddess’s body is honored and worshiped. The goddess is then adorned in beautiful garments, and the *avahāraṇ pūjā* (invocation worship) commences. The older idol is ceremoniously immersed in the flowing waters of the Alaknanda and Mandakini rivers in Rudraprayag. For nine days, the worship of *Durgā* continues with the added excitement of *havan* (Vedic fire worship) in the afternoon.

A Small Temple of *Chaukrī Devī*

This small temple dedicated to *Rājrajeshwarī Devī*'s companion, *Chaukrī Devī*, is located on the back side of the *Rājrajeshwarī* temple complex. (*Chaukrī Devī* is one of the many companions of *Rājrajeshwarī Devī*. The phenomenon of companionship is complex and rich and is, therefore, beyond the scope of this paper). Everyone who comes to the temple also prays to *Chaukrī* while circumambulating the temple. Worshipping *Chaukrī*, is believed to be important to make *Rājrajeshwarī* happy and her worship complete. One of the characteristics of the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī pujārī* is the coming of *Rājrajeshwarī* into the *pujārī* through divine embodiment. This is evidenced by the *pujārī* shouting, "Hey *Chaukrī!*" thereby asking *Chaukrī* to accompany the *devī*. There are specific body movements, such as cross-legged walking, fierce eye movements, and hands in the air, that mark a definitive lived presence of the goddess. Often, people who experience the divine embodiment of deities like *Rājrajeshwarī*, *Bhairav*, *Khatkalinkā* (one of the forms of *Kālī*), and *Bhutyor* go towards *Chaukrī* while circumambulating the *Rājrajeshwarī* temple.





Bhairav asks for Sacrifice

This image was taken at the *Bhairav* temple, 200 meters downhill from the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* temple. *Bhairav* surveils all directions in the service of *Rājrajeshwarī* in order to find and punish wrongdoers on behalf of the *devī*. Therefore, his temple does not have a ceiling. While this photograph was being taken, the surroundings were filled with the cadenced sound of the *ḍhol-damauñ* along with the ringing of bells. During the *pūjā*, the Brahmins chanted mantras in honor of *Bhairav*. Here, the *naur* (representative/medium) of *Bhairav* (standing, dressed in light grey and shouting) pictured became possessed, shouted, and did a *parikramā* (circumambulation) of the *Bhairav* temple. Subhash Chandra, dressed in a yellow kurta, asked *Bhairav* if he wanted a goat for sacrifice. To this, *Bhairav* said: "*Balī chahiye*" (I want sacrifice). As a result, a goat sacrifice was arranged on the 10th day of worship.



Dhol-Damauñ Players

The large drum is known as *dhol* and the smaller kettle-shaped drum, just visible in the image, is known as *damauñ*. They are often played together and are known as forms of *Śiva* and *Śaktī*, respectively (Chandola 1977). The knowledge of how to play *dhol-damauñ* is transmitted orally and is known as *dholsāgar* (ocean of drumming) (Alter 2008: 83). *Dhol-damauñ* were played during the entire worship for nine days, using a specific rhythm that invokes the deities. It is said that the sound of the *dhol-damauñ* makes the gods dance (Alter 2008). Drumming and possession are crucial elements of the “ritual action” around the worship of the goddess (Alter 2019: 321). In the photograph, we can see that the knowledgeable older musicians are passing on the skills to the younger ones by allowing them to practice the rhythms during the day. The person in red is the medium of the *Chaukrī Devī*.



The *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* Heals a Medical Doctor

On each morning of the *Navrātri*, a *panch pūja* (elaborate worship of *Ganesh*, *Ṣoḍaśmātrikā*, *Lakshmī*, *Oṅkar* (a form of *Śiva*), and *Navagraha*) was performed. According to Hindu tradition, worshipping these deities is compulsory, and the ritual worship of any deity or event, such as a marriage ceremony or an idol change, is said to be incomplete without such devotions. Between the various morning worship events, *Rājrajeshwarī's pūjārī* frequently became possessed and was visited by devotees seeking the goddess's blessings or healing power. For example, Dr. Ankit (in purple), the son of Subhash Chandra, had experienced a cold and fever for the previous two months. Medicines were unable to resolve his illness. Through the *pūjārī*, the *devī* said that he had been given some food indicative of black magic at his maternal house, resulting in his distress. The *pūjārī* chanted some words into his uncooked rice-filled fist during his possession, which he then placed on Dr. Ankit's forehead. The doctor's fever and cold went away the next day. Dr. Ankit's family was present during this event. As they worshiped the goddess collectively alongside other devotees, the healing took place at a social level and was not restricted to an individual. As Sax describes in relation to *Bhairav*, such healing practices include family, neighborhood, lineage, or village and do not occur only at the individual level (Sax 2009 245).



The Vedic Element of *Havan* (Fire Worship)

Every afternoon, an elaborate three-hour *havan* (Vedic fire worship) was performed in the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* temple. Mango wood and sacred fig-tree wood are used in the *havan* as they are considered pure. The *havan* serves two primary purposes. First, it is performed for the purification of the environment. Second, *swāhā* (lit. offering) is chanted after every mantra during the *havan*. It is believed that, through these mantras, the offerings of items such as dry fruits, fruits, ghee, rice, and spices to the fire, reach the deities directly, and burning the offerings in the *havan* is considered to purify the air around the site. The worship is considered to be incomplete without a *havan* coupled with the sonic element of *dhola-damaññ*. Together, these practices represent a line of continuity from the Vedic period blended with ancient indigenous traditions.

Chaukrī Devī and the Rājrajeshwarī Devī Blessing their Devotees

In the photo, the naur of Chaukrī (in red) jumps with a fierce expression. Each deity has specific body movements and expressions through which its presence is identified (see Sax 2009). Chaukrī jumps to demonstrate that she is satisfied with the performance of the worship. The possession of Chaukrī happens only when Rājrajeshwarī's pujārī, possessed by the devī, approaches Chaukrī's naur. Through her pujārī, Rājrajeshwarī bestows blessings on people by giving them uncooked rice grains. This act signifies that the deities are happy with how the havan is being conducted. Throughout the havan (Vedic fire worship), the sound of the dhol-damauñ filled the entire temple complex illustrating how, in this worship, possession, rhythmic music, and chants in Sanskrit take place simultaneously. As the naur become the embodied presence of the deities, the devotees join their hands and seek blessings from them.





Yantra of the Devī and Bhūt-Pret (Malevolent Spirits)

The *yantra* of *Rājrajeshwarī* is displayed on the right side of the image, while the *yantra* of *bhūt-pre* (malevolent spirits) can be seen on the left. This ritual takes place during *Kālratrī*, the seventh night of the worship. On this day, the *bhūt-pre* are given offerings to ensure they cause no obstructions or disturbances. The entire village brings small amounts of cereals, which are then semi-cooked and offered to the *bhūt-pre* to prevent them from causing any problems such as affliction, illness, or dispute. A sacrifice of *genjaḍā* (a local vegetable) is made in the temple complex. During this night, the screams of two or three women possessed by unknown local deities could be heard from a distance elsewhere in the village. Locals understand this kind of possession as spirits alerting the villagers to stay in their homes while the *yantra* of both the *devī* and *bhūt-pre*, along with semi-cooked rice, black pulses, rot, and *churma* (all local dishes), were being placed in a nearby jungle away from the homes of the villagers as an offering for the *bhūt-pre*.



Jaljatra on the 8th Day

On the eighth day of worship, more than fifty *kanyā* (unmarried girls) travel barefoot to collect water in a small copper vessel at a *dhārā* (waterspout) 1.5 km from the temple. They then carry the filled copper vessels back to *Rājrajeshwarī Devī*'s temple. During this process, *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* takes possession of the *pujārī* and bathes in the *dhārā*. Locals understand this possession as *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* watching the entire worship process herself by being materially present through the divine embodiment of her *pujārī*.

Final day of Navrātri

The *havan* concludes on the ninth day of worship, with the *ḍhol-damauñ* continuing to resound and several deities taking possession of their mediums. In this photo, *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* has taken possession of the *pujārī*, who is dressed in white, and *Khatkalinkā Devī* has taken possession of the person dressed in light yellow. Additionally, *Bhairav*, *Chaukrī*, and *Bhutyor* took possession of their respective *naur*. This was the climax of the worship, as all the major deities related to the temple marked their presence through possession and ritual action. It is not only the *pujārī* and *naur* who become possessed. Devotees can be possessed by the deities they pray to in their homes, who are known as *kul devtā* (family deity). A *kul devtā* does not need to be *Durgā* or one of her forms. Three women devotees were possessed by their *kul devtā* along with the *pujārī* and *naur* of the aforementioned deities. Such possession can happen at any time during the worship but becomes more prevalent during the ninth day as the worship reaches its climax. The *Rājrajeshwarī Devī naur* circumambulated the fire. Before the establishment of the new *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* idol, the *pujārī* would throw his feet toward the fire to symbolize the accidental partial burning of the *devī* in the 2009 fire. Since the establishment of the new idol, the *pujārī* no longer throws his feet toward the fire.





Ārtī of the Devī

Here, *Bhairav's naur* offers the *ārtī* (worship involving the offering of light and singing the praise of a deity) to the place where the *havan* took place. All the devotees recite the *ārtī* of the *devī* together, along with the sound of bells and *ḍhol-damauñ*. The coal and remnants of the *havan* are applied to devotees' foreheads, and they are then given *prasād* (holy offering). As the *ārtī* ended, nine *kanyā* (unmarried girls) were offered food and worshiped, as they are believed to be the nine forms of the *devī*. All village residents and devotees then consumed food prepared in the temple complex.



Sacrifice for *Khatkalinkā Devī*

The ritual action described here was carried out during the 10th day of the worship. Without worshipping *Khatkalinkā* (one of the forms of *Kālī*) and *Bhairav*, the worship of *Rājrajeshwarī* is believed to be incomplete. This place is located a few meters downhill from the *Rājrajeshwarī Devī* temple and is known as *Chakra kī Pathāl*. *Pathāl* means stone, and *Chakra* means circle. The devotees circumambulate the dark-grey stone visible in the image. The *naur* of *Khatkalinkā* sitting to the far left is praying to the stone. Animal sacrifice has not taken place in the *Rājrajeshwarī* temple since 2015. Instead, as mentioned earlier in this essay, the sacrifice on the seventh day of *Kālātrī* has been that of a local vegetable named *genjaḍā*, which acts as a substitute for the goat. According to local legend, archeologists attempted to uncover what lay beneath this stone eight decades ago (the exact date is unknown). As they turned the stone, fire emerged from it, and they haphazardly replaced the stone upside down. At this exact place, a male buffalo was sacrificed 15 years ago, as there is an age-old tradition of offering buffalo to *Khatkalinkā*. The frequency of sacrifice performance was drastically reduced after 2015 due to strict prohibitions on such practices. October 15, 2021, was the first time a goat was sacrificed to the *Khatkalinkā Devī* in the temple's history because buffalo sacrifice is now banned. As replacing the idol was a grand worship event, *Khatkalinkā* was also prayed to elaborately. A sacrifice happens only in such grand worship events. Two goats were selected for the sacrifice—one for *Khatkalinkā* and one for *Bhairav*. During the worship, *Khatkalinkā Devī's naur* became possessed and selected the goat to be sacrificed by placing his teeth on the goat. The temple committee did not allow photography of the sacrifice. Mantras were chanted, rice was thrown toward the goat, and some rice and water were kept inside the goat's ear. A sacrifice takes place only when the goat shakes not only its head but its full body. This is understood as a sign that the deity has accepted the goat for the sacrifice. It took about 20 minutes for the goat to shake its entire body.



Sacrifice for *Bhairav Devtā*

As stated earlier, any major worship event of *Rājrajeshwarī* is said to be incomplete if *Khatkalinkā* and *Bhairav* are not also worshiped. Because the idol change of *Rājrajeshwarī* was a grand event, both *Khatkalinkā* and *Bhairav* asked for sacrifice through their *naur*; therefore, two goats, one for each deity, were arranged. Everyone was sure it would only take five to ten minutes for *Bhairav's* goat to shake its entire body. Surprisingly, it took over two and a half hours for the goat to shake its whole body, which signifies that *Bhairav* has accepted the sacrifice. The meat was eaten by the villagers who eat non-veg food irrespective of their caste. It is understood as *prasād* of the *devī*, which is distributed to the villagers. Had the goat not shaken its entire body, the sacrifice would not have been made. Instead, it would have been understood that, from now on, *Bhairav* would not desire any form of sacrifice.

Conclusion

The worship documented in these photos and descriptions does not represent everyday ritual practice but illustrates the elaborate rituals performed to consecrate a new idol of the *Rājrajeshwarī* deity. The replacement of the idol, damaged in a fire in 2009, was seen as a crucial step in ensuring that the goddess continued to be honored and worshipped appropriately by the villagers. The essay also highlights the importance of other deities in the temple complex, such as *Bhairav*, *Bhutyor*, *Chaukrī*, and *Khatkalinkā*, whose presence is crucial for the success of grand worship rituals in the *Rājrajeshwarī* temple. This ritual served as a powerful reminder to the villagers of the significance of *Rājrajeshwarī* in their culture and tradition and brought the community together in a shared celebration. Additionally, the essay sheds light on the significance of the Garhwal Himalayan region as a “*dev bhūmi*” or “Land of the Gods” and how local beliefs and experiences are intertwined with the presence of deities. The worship of *Rājrajeshwarī* also demonstrates how devotees, through their material, emotional, physical, ritual, and spiritual participation, added meaning to the entire event of idol change that took place during *Navrātri* of the Ashwin month. This ritual served as an opportunity to strengthen social cohesion and unity among the villagers. The idol change is situated at the convergence of culture and society. After the worship concludes, the new *Rājrajeshwarī* idol is believed to have the same power as before, which ensures the well-being of the entire village as she is a gram *devtā* (village deity). We argue that this ritual carries a special meaning for the local community, whose relationship with the deity is not just cognitive but embodied in practices such as possession.

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