

Research Article

The Divine as a Child and the Mother Goddess: On the History and Practice of Kunwarikā Devī Worship in the Garhwal Himalaya

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Abstract

Kunwarikā Devī is one of the forms of *Ādi Śaktī* (primordial goddess) and is represented as a *kanyā* (unmarried little girl). She is worshiped both as a child and as a mother goddess in the Garhwal Himalaya. In 2019, there was a significant worship event of the goddess after a gap of 92 years (the previous worship had occurred in 1927). The *Devī* traveled to different villages to bless devotees and keep them safe. The Kunwarikā Devī worship practice can help illuminate the relationship between regional attachment and divinity, as Uttarakhand is referred to as the *dev bhūmi*, namely “land of the Gods.” The *Kunwarikā Devī* worship is located at the intersections of culture and society. The paper elucidates how the history of the *Devī*, her worship, story, and regional attachment are all connected. It argues that such journeys play a central role in integrating the Garhwali community but do not remove the organizational tensions that mark the *Kunwarikā Devī* procession. Finally, through detailed descriptions of the preparation and conduct of the worship, we highlight the organizational challenges involved in executing a ritual event on this scale.

Keywords

Uttarakhand; Kunwarikā Devī; Garhwal Himalaya; religion; pilgrimage

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Introduction

There has been considerable scholarship on everyday religious practices in South Asia, particularly India (e.g., Chandola 1977, Sax 1990; 1991; 2000; 2002; 2003; 2006; 2009, Dwyer 2003, Feldhaus 2003, Shulman and Thiagarajan 2006, Sax and Polit 2012, Kakar 2012, Purohit 2001; 2006, Flueckiger 2006, Alter 2008, Sax 2009, Malik 2010, Bellamy 2011, Ranganathan 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2018, Sharabi and Shalev 2016, Jassal 2017). The esoteric and mystical practices of worshipping *devī-devtās* (Hindu deities) and ancestral spirits and remembering ancient ways of being in Uttarakhand share similarities with experiences in East Africa, Indonesia, and Turkic Siberia, as well as having their own unique character. Similarities include the use of rhythmic instruments, the role of mythology as a binding force, and the practice of possession (see Campbell 1960, Hoskins 1988, Dausen 2004). There are various examples of processional journeys in India like the *Ratha yatrā* (chariot festival) of Lord Jagannath held at Puri in Odisha state, the *Ratha yatrā* of Mahesh in West Bengal, the Sabarimala procession held at Kerala, and the *Caitra Śiṅṅāpūr* pilgrimage in Maharashtra (see Feldhaus 2003) to name a few.

The number of processional journeys such as that of Nainī Devī, Nandā Devī (Sax 1991), Kedarnath, Tungnāth, Fegu, Saṅśwar, Indrasyon, Mekhandā Maī, Munī Mahārāj, Jilasū Chandikā, Simlī Chandikā, Narī Chandikā, Chandikā Devī of Meher-Kandaī (Benjwal 2022, Purohit 2022), Ratudā Chandikā, and the Rājrajeshwarī Devī of Kandārā is quite high in Uttarakhand (Purohit 2001) (see Figure 1). Such processions are locally known as *devarā*.¹ Religious practices in Uttarakhand include *yātrā* (pilgrimage) to Kedārñāth, Gangotrī, Yamunotrī, and Badrināth. The central thread binding all such processional journeys is their role in community integration.² In the Garhwal Himalaya, daily needs and their relation to the environment, such as the well-being of livestock and good crop production, are crucial

aspects of worshipping various deities who also act as guiding forces, givers of *nyāya* (justice), and dispellers of affliction. At the same time, tensions and challenges accompany the organization of such large-scale worship practices. This paper demonstrates how regional attachment (in this case, the Garhwal Himalaya) and stories revolving around deities (here, *Kunwarikā Devī*) shape and are shaped by each other. This paper also illustrates that *yagna* (Vedic fire worship) and animal sacrifices, typically understood as sanitized and “backward” practices, respectively, can sometimes go together. Scholars have pointed out that the Brahminic-Purāṇic tradition is different from the local aspects of divinity. Divinity in Brahminic tradition is typically characterized as abstract and pure (Fuller 1992); however, the worship here was a combination of Vedic tradition with local indigenous elements of possession and sacrifice, as will be discussed in this paper.

As Uttarakhand is referred to as *dev bhūmī* “land of the Gods” (Alter 2008, Chandola 1977), it is crucial to understand what this field entails as a region and sacred space. The paper locates the procession of *Kunwarikā Devī* at the intersection of culture and society. Through our ethnographic fieldwork, we found that it is not only the people who move in the procession; the deity also moves with them through *banyāt* (processional worship)³ and interacts with other deities during the journey. The paper will begin by describing the larger setting, which is Uttarakhand, especially the Garhwal Himalaya. The local village deities known as *devī-devtās* are in the foreground of religious experience in the Garhwal Himalaya. *Devī-devtās* (Hindu deities) have their *nīsān* (signs) like their palanquin (see Figure 1), images, and thrones (Sutherland 2004). A dispute that contributed to the organizational challenges of the *Kunwarikā Devī* worship is also discussed in the paper. Moreover, an attempt is made to weave together literature from anthropology, psychology, and religious studies by understanding how the “material” and the “transcendental” interact.



Figure 1: *Barma Thaṅkrā* (palanquin) of four different Chandikā Devī. From left: Simlī Chandikā, Meher-Kandai Chandikā, Kunwarikā, and Dhaulagiri Chandikā (Anshu 2008-2022)

Folk religion in Garhwal is characterized by divine processions that occur at regular intervals (Sax 2003, Purohit 2001). The processions include drums, horns, bells, and artistically decorated palanquins. It is through ritual practice and invocation that a deity takes an agentic form in a given space and in the minds of people through a journey by palanquin (*Barma Thaṅkrā*⁴ in the case of *Kunwarikā Devī* - see Figure 1) and through possession. The *devī-devtās*, then, are not only an invisible potent entity but also visible through their material signs (*nisān*) and their interactions via a human medium (Malik 2010). By uplifting the present conditions of the worshipers in terms of prosperity, property-related issues, health, and justice for social conflicts (Sax 2009), their potency is reinforced.

The processional journeys blend story, social memory, iconography, power, and morality. Like fairs and festivals (Purohit 2001), these processions, too, are cultural and social events (Purohit 2006). Historically, such processional journeys helped the villagers become familiar with a wider region by interacting with people from many other villages. In such *yatrā*, the exchange of grains and seeds also took place, thereby boosting agricultural practices. There is a “performative moment” as the core of the ritual involves a musical performance that happens through the dance of the *Barma Thaṅkrā*. The grounds for undertaking such difficult processional journeys can be understood through the collective and social memory, which Connerton says, is made up of “[...] images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past . . . [that] are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances” (Connerton 1989: 3-4). As such, processional journeys are sites for collective healing. When individuals ask the *devī* in front of their family members why they are suffering from discord, arguments,

or disease, the *devī*, through her oracle, often indicates the need for the worship of the *devtā* (Hindu deity) of their family. In such contexts, “healing” is often not about removing affliction but restoring social relationships⁵. It is not the individual who is the subject of therapy but a “social field” comprising family, neighborhood, lineage, or village (Sax 2009).

This paper describes a particular worship event for *Kunwarikā Devī*, one of the forms of *Ādi Śaktī* (primordial goddess) that was studied as part of a larger ethnography of ritual practices of healing in the Garhwal Himalaya. In this ritual event, *Kunwarikā devī* is represented as a *kanyā* (unmarried little girl) and is worshiped both as a child and a mother goddess in the Garhwal Himalaya. In 2019, a procession for



Figure 2: This round structure, made of *bablu ghās* (a type of wild grass) is worshiped and distributed as a *prasād* of the *Devī* (Gairola 2021).

Kunwarikā Devī took place after 92 years, the last worship event of that type having occurred in 1927. Fieldwork was thus prompted by this fundamental question as to why the procession took place after such a long time. As with most ritual processions, the conduct of the procession is a “work” requiring the involvement of different villages (six villages here for *Kunwarikā*) and numerous village members; therefore, bringing people together is difficult. Moreover, the project poses a considerable challenge, as the *Śiv gaṇ* (Śiva devotees who accompany the goddess) maintain, “How can one commit to serving the *devī* for six months, leaving everything else? In today’s times, people do not have much time to do such feats.” However, our interlocutors told us that they received a wage that helped with the logistics of the worship.

An additional problem was that a dispute occurred in 2019 (replicating one that had taken place in 1927) between the Brahmins of Maṇiguha and Bhattwari over the customary rights of worship. As per the

religious practice, these *yatrās*, irrespective of the *devī* or *devtā*, are supposed to occur every 12 years or so. However, Vinod Prakash Bhatt, our interlocutor, said that after every 12 years, the dispute became a fresh wound and was rekindled even after nine decades. Alternatively, people believe the *devī* herself decides when she will come out; that is the “will of the *devī*.” It is her *doṣ*, i.e., “a divine sanction resulting from god’s displeasure, a kind of “ontological disease” (Sax 2003: 183) that becomes active. She appears in the villagers’ dreams or as *bablu ghās* (a type of wild grass) that grows in the mountainous land of the organizing villages of the procession. Such dreams of seeing the goddess and the growth of *bablu ghās* in the field are interpreted as the *devī* wanting to come out for the procession. Interestingly, *bablu ghās* is turned into a rope (Figure 2) and is the only *prasād*⁶ of the *devī* distributed at the end of the worship.

This paper foregrounds the significance of place and ritual practice in the context

of the *Kunwarikā Devī* worship in the Garhwal Himalaya. The zone of cultural experiencing can be seen through Winnicott's transitional phenomena, which is

[...] unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to arts, and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work (Winnicott 1971: 14).

Aftab Jassal (2017) opens up the element of *sthān* (place) and *jagah* (space) for a deity, and notes how the making of place transforms both human and divine participants in a ritual. It is through ritual enactment and instrumentalization of *sthān* that the interaction with the divine is established. In a different but significant context, Feldhaus (2003) illustrates the significance of religious imagery tied to specific regions. Such imagery is recreated through stories, rituals, ceremonies, and folklore and plays a crucial role in connecting people and places (Figure 3).

Field and Methods

This study focused on a worship event for the *Kunwarikā Devī*, which was taking place after a nine-decade gap, and comprised ethnographic fieldwork in the Bhattwari-Maniguha region and Kandārā village in the Rudraprayag district of Uttarakhand from November-December 2019 and April-May 2021. The event was organized by six villages located in the picturesque Kedar valley of Rudraprayag district of Uttarakhand state, namely, Malkhi, Khali, Khamoli, Maṇiguha, Bhattwari, and Enta. Through the initiation by the *Kunwarikā Dev Yātrā* Organizing Committee, Jag/Yagyapatī of Kuñwar *jātī* (a resident of Maṇiguha village who is the *adhyaksh* (chairperson) of the *Yātrā* Committee), other regional devotees, and Brahmins of Bhatt *jātī* started the worship with Vedic chanting. Devotees worshiped in open yards near the



Figure 3: People from different villages seeking blessings from the *Barma Ṭhañkrā* (palanquin) of *Kunwarikā Devī*. (Gairola 2021).

Maijaṇa Yogī Kutiyā and Mahadev Temple. The event began on November 29-30, 2019, after *Śaktī* invocation worship and *praṇa pratiṣṭhā* (establishing life force through rituals) of the goddess.

The worship was scheduled to continue for six months, beginning in November 2019 and ending in May 2020. The journey started from the villages that were the main organizers. Thirty to thirty-five persons, including one *Bāldeo* (child form of Lord Viṣṇu) and seven *Śiv gaṇ* (followers of Lord Śiva), make the journey together, traveling first towards the north, then the west, then the south, and finally towards the east. In this way, a huge *yagna* is organized within eighteen days after the completion of the tour in villages located in four directions from the starting point. All those making the journey travel barefoot and follow specific

rules about the kind of dress worn and the food eaten.

A total of seventeen semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out by the first author in Garhwali and Hindi with various people in the field, such as seven *Śiv gaṇ*, *Bāldeo*, Brijmohan Bhatt (*barma* (main worshiper who invokes the goddess) of the *devī*), Lalita Prasad Purohit (an expert on sacrificial worship), Prof. Data Ram Purohit, Shambhu Bhatt (local author - see Bhatt 2020), two Brahmins of Maṇiguha village, two women who underwent possession, and Deepak Benjwal (a local historian who has written about such processions - see Benjwal 2022). Moreover, short semi-structured interviews were taken with the devotees from different villages, as well as the chairperson, treasurer, and secretary of the Worship Committee. Additionally, participant observation involving extensive photo and video recordings was carried out to capture the process. The interviews were recorded through an audio-recorder and then transcribed and translated into a notebook. Exploration of the worship and its negotiations is understood through “ordinary” people (McGuire 2008) who are not necessarily experts through theory but through the experience of customs, tradition, ritual, and practices comprising the vernacular elements of religious life. The interviewees were asked open-ended questions, which granted them agency to direct the flow of the content.

One village of the six that arranged the worship was the ancestral maternal place of the first author. The first author is a native of the field, with Bhattwari village being his maternal home. The second author has extensively researched possession and trance practices in other contexts (see Ranganathan 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2017; 2018). Both authors are trained in psychology and qualitative research but have made extensive forays into anthropology and fieldwork. Our collaboration on this paper provides rich perspectives from both insider and outsider locations wherein we can simultaneously attach and detach

from the paradoxes and processes of the field.

Approaching the Place

Spiritual practices of meditation in natural environments have been an integral part of the ascetic Hindu tradition of Uttarakhand, with several temples dedicated to Śiva, *devī*, and the Pandava brothers (Alter 2008). Because of the spiritual presence that has been felt all over the Himalaya since ancient times, that is, for thousands of years, the mountainous region of Uttarakhand has been the place where a *devyatṛā* (pilgrimage) of *dolī* (palanquin) of the *devī-devtās* and *devchinha* (symbols of different *devī-devtās*) have been carried out (Chandola 1977, Alter 2008, Bhatt 2020). In the Kedar *ghatī* (valley) of the Rudraprayag district, the *devyatṛā* (pilgrimage) of Kunwarikā, also known as *Kumarikā Devī*, has been carried out for hundreds of years (Bhatt 2020, Shiv Kumar Bhatt, Vinod Bhatt, and Brijmohan Bhatt, personal communication, April 2021).

Figure 1 shows the long bamboo pole known as the *Barma Ṭhañkrā* (palanquin), made for the journey of the goddess *Chandikā* who is differentiated according to the village she belongs to (Purohit 2022). For example, the goddess *Chandikā* of the Simlī and Dhaulagirī villages are referred to as “*Simlī Chandikā*” and “*Dhaulagirī Chandikā*,” respectively. *Kunwarikā* is also understood to be *Chandikā*, although she has a different name. All of them have aspects in common: the top of the palanquin is covered by *chaunr muṭh* (tail hair of a local bovine known as *chaunr*). Idols of deities like Gaṇesha and Durgā are placed on top of the dome, along with more than a hundred types of herbs.⁷ People known as *Śiv gaṇ* or *arowlā*⁸, wearing *ghāgrā* (white clothes) with their faces covered, follow the procession. They are accompanied by a child or a teenage boy in yellow clothes who holds the symbol of *Bāldeo* (child form of Lord Viṣṇu; Kṛṣṇa, to be specific). The child is referred to as *Bāldeo*. Our interlocutors from the *yatrā* committee told us that *Bāldeo* and

Chandikā are siblings. The legend says that Kṛṣṇa was born in a prison to kill Kansa, the ruler of Mathura City. However, he was safely exchanged with a little girl whom Kansa attempted to kill, but the child vanished, stating that Kansa's destroyer (i.e., Kṛṣṇa) was alive and safe. The bonding is recreated in these processions where Kṛṣṇa (i.e., *Bāldeo*) accompanies *Chandikā* wherever she goes.

The *yatrā* was halted from March 22, 2020, due to the pandemic and lockdowns and reinitiated on December 28, 2020. During *Navrātrī* (nine days of worshipping the nine forms of the goddess *Durgā*), the worship of *Kunwarikā Devī* comes to an end. Meanwhile, COVID-19 cases were also increasing day by day. It is important to note that the deities and the local villagers are intimately linked in the everyday. All along Uttarakhand's roads, one can find small temples with red and yellow flags tied to the trees. In that sense, deities, regional attachment, the introjection of sacredness, and the psychological makeup of a person

living in Uttarakhand resonate with each other (Fiol 2018).

After reaching Bhattwari in the evening, following all the mandatory COVID checks, the first author visited the site where a *pandāl* (tent) had been created. Inside was a square structure with banana leaves on four sides. These four banana leaves symbolize the four Vedas (see Figure 4). The Brahmins told us that Vedic mantras have historically been an essential part of the worship. In front of this *pandāl* was another, and below that was a huge *yagna kund* (a place to make *yagna* offerings to the fire - see Figure 5). On the right side of the *yagna kund* was a mud sculpture of *Dakṣa Prajāpati*, the first person to perform *yagna* in Vedic times.⁹ As *yagna* was to be performed on the final day of *Navrātrī*, the presence of *Dakṣa Prajāpati* presence symbolized the first practice of *yagna*.

It was evident that worship and festivity went hand-in-hand. Around the place where the main *yagna* (fire worship) was



Figure 4: This structure, known as *vedī* (main place), is covered with banana leaves on four sides. Here, under a *pandāl* (tent), the final *pūjā* took place (Gairola 2021).



Figure 5: *Yagna kund* site (where fire worship is done) and the location of the final worship of the Kunwarikā Devī (known as Barmatolī) in Maṅiguha Village (Gairola 2021).

proceeding, there were ice cream sellers who came from far-off areas, stalls for biscuits and chips, and people selling mirrors and utensils, indicating the emergence of an entire local economy around the worship, as is typically found in religious sites across the country. In the morning, inside the main tent area, *pañch pūjā* (Vedic worship) took place for all the deities. It was an elaborate process involving mantras, milk, ghee, honey, water, and other items. People brought wood for the main *yagna* area and worked together to prepare for the worship. People were wearing masks, but social distancing was not followed. Devotees also brought uncooked rice, barley, and ghee from their homes for the *yagna*. As *dhol-damaun* (two rhythmic instruments that are almost always used together) musicians played numerous repertoires, the people who participated in the *pūjā* gave them money.

Two women were possessed by the *devī*, with the trance lasting about ten seconds, and an elderly man went into a trance for a few seconds. They were not devotees of the goddess from the organizing villages. They said that it was the *bhāv* (emotion) of the *devī* that stirred them. In the afternoon, there was food for everyone, which included *poori* (deep-fried bread), chickpeas, and *halwā* (a sweet dish made of semolina, sugar, and ghee). There was one *lok kalākār* (folk artist) whose financial condition was not good due to a lack of recognition. He kept his certificates in front of the place where he sat, near the main worship area. He sang a song in Garhwali about *Kunwarikā Devī* as well as other local songs while playing the *daphlī* (a small rhythmic instrument), and people gave him money. Simultaneously, the names of those who had made offerings to the goddess in the main worship area were announced over the microphone.

Historicizing *Kunwarikā Devī*

The *sthān* (place) of *Kunwarikā Devī* is in the home of the Raṇa family in Maṇiguha village, where she is worshiped from time to time.¹⁰ For the procession, a committee was formed by the villagers of the three *grām panchāyats* of Maṇiguha, Malkhi, and Bhattwari because there is no public temple for *Kunwarikā Devī*, neither is there a registered committee nor does the place of the goddess come under Shri Badrinath Kedarnath Temple Committee (BKTC). The collective narrative of the devotees of both Maṇiguha and Bhattwari villages and that of participants from other villages was that this elaborate procession was happening after 92 years and that the last time it happened was in 1927. A local publication supports this assertion (Bhatt 2020: 31).

In 2019, two people representing sixteen residents of Maṇiguha filed a case regarding the *yatrā* committee formed by the Bhatt Brahmins of Bhattwari to decide the logistics of the procession and *yagna*. The petitioners stated that the committee had been formed without their acceptance and willingness. They claimed that the *yagna* of *Kunwarikā Devī* was arranged by the ancestors of Maṇiguha and that that practice had been followed up to the present day. Maṇiguha contended that it was their customary right to perform the worship practice. Despite their contentions, the documentary proof favored the Brahmins of Bhattwari village because the Maṇiguha representatives failed to give sufficient evidence regarding their customary right to organize the worship. As a result, the court gave the Bhatt Brahmins of Bhattwari a temporary right to perform the ritual and conduct the *yagna* (Bhatt v. Negi 2019). As in the recent worship from 2019 to 2021, the *pradhan āchārya* (main brahmin) and *barma* (main worshiper who invokes the goddess) of the *devī* were Bhatt Brahmins of Bhattwari; several Bhatt Brahmins from Maṇiguha did not participate as they felt their rights had been infringed. The case is still pending in the Rudraprayag District Court so no assertion can be made about the outcome.

This conflict regarding who will perform the *yagna* of the *devī* and who will become her *barma*¹¹ has become synonymous with the procession itself. It has been going on for more than a hundred years. The tensions around the worship event still occur today. This conflict demonstrates the challenges surrounding the organization of such a grand procession because bringing people together for such an event is fraught with tensions. Being the *barma* of the *devī* is associated with power, respect, and prestige. Hence, the organizers are not only fighting over their rights but over the distribution of power among themselves. Despite the conflict, the attention of most of the devotees is focused on the *devī* herself. Many devotees directly or indirectly related to the processional journey are unaware of the conflict. Numerous villages and regions come together to serve the *devī*.

Kunwarikā is an unmarried little girl. According to legend, Lord Rāma went to south India in search of Sītā. During that period, a girl named Vaiśnavī was undertaking penance in Tamil Nadu. Upon seeing Lord Rāma, she wished to marry him. However, as Lord Rāma was *Maryada Purshottam* (the most dignified man) and monogamous, he declined her request. He told her that, after searching for Sītā, he would return to this place, and if she could identify him, he would marry her. As fate would have it, she could not identify him when he returned. Upon her being unable to recognize him, Lord Rāma explained that he was the very Rāma she hoped to marry. Hence, as per the agreement, he did not marry her. However, he said he would marry her in his next *avatar* “descent” as *Kalkī* in Kaliyuga. In the meantime, he directed the girl to go north. He specifically directed her to Jammu, where *Trikūt Parvat* is located; here, she could continue penance and wait for Rāma’s Kaliyuga *avatar*. In *Trikūt Parvat*, there is a site dedicated to *Vaiśno Devī*, who, to date, is worshiped as an unmarried little girl. This name, *Kumarī* or *Kumarikā* in Sanskrit, is known as *Kunwarikā* in the Garhwali dialect. Thus, the *devī*, who was *Kanyākumarī* in the south of India, went to *Trikūt Parvat* and came



Figure 6: This symbol of *Bāldeo* (child form of Lord Viṣṇu), made of bamboo, is kept near the *vedī* (principal place of worship). It represents the child dressed in yellow who travels with the *devī* along with seven *Śiv gaṇ* (Lord Śiva devotees) (Gairola 2021).

to the Garhwal Himalaya as *Kunwarikā* (Shambhu Bhatt, personal communication, April 2021).

How the *Devī* came to the Garhwal Himalaya

The pine forests near Maṇiguha supply the locals with wood for fuel and construction. Regarding the arrival of the *devī* in Garhwal, a local legend features a farmer of Kshatriya descent from Maṇiguha village who went to the forest to fetch firewood. Shambhu Bhatt, a local author, said that sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century or perhaps way before it, this man was returning from collecting firewood in a forest known as Dyula when he found

the weight of the wood on his back suddenly increased. Turning to look over his shoulder, he saw a little girl sitting on the firewood and adding to its weight. Seeing this, he asked the unknown girl, “Who are you? And why are you sitting on the top of the wood at my back?” The little girl responded, “I am a simple girl living in Kedar *ghātī*, and right now, I am tired as I have traveled a long way barefoot.”

Legend has it that she uttered the above lines with such sweetness that the farmer consented to carry her on his back. Through divine intervention, the load became lighter than before. Realizing this, the farmer became very cheerful and started walking fast. After a short distance, he started feeling thirsty. When he mentioned this to the girl, she said she would arrange something. She descended from his back and touched the ground with her little finger. Immediately, a strong stream of water started flowing from that place, and the farmer quenched his thirst. The site with the water stream is known as *Rikhnaū*.

After the temple of *Vardatrī Devī*, the footpath divides, with one path going to Maṇiguha village and the other to Bhattwari. The farmer with the girl on his back took the path to Maṇiguha.

When the farmer was a short distance from the village, the girl told him she wanted to go ahead alone. She said that whenever he needed her, she would be there. The farmer walked on, and when he turned back, she was nowhere to be seen. That farmer was a Rajput of the Raṅkhola family in Maṇiguha village. When he related this incident to the village members, everybody thought it was the *devī*'s blessing (Bhatt 2020). People from the village went to different places in search of the *devī*. After some time, along with the farmer's family, people from different places also participated in the *devarā* (travel of the *devī*). A total of six villages, including Maṇiguha and Bhattwari, became involved under the watch of the Kuñwars (Rajputs) in different

years. People from Entā village consider the girl their *dhiyān* (out-married daughter).

The Principal Worship Place

As stated earlier, *Kunwarikā Devī* is accompanied by seven *Śiv gaṇ* (devotees of Lord Śiva) dressed in white clothes with red borders and one child (*Bāldeo*) dressed completely in yellow. For the duration of the procession from 2019 to 2021, they escorted the *devī* to all the villages she visited.¹² The worship began on the night of November 29, 2019, with an invocation by the Bhatt Brahmins of Bhattwari village in the presence of six host villages near Maijana Mahādev temple. Goddess *Kunwarikā*'s symbol was a silver plate-like structure (*farsa*), which was worshiped (Figure 7). With it was a two-finger-length small stick, a leather mask, a flat copper statue set in handcuffs made of *ringāl* (bamboo), and a statue of *Bāldeo* (child form of Lord Viṣṇu - see Figure 6). Notably, the head part of the *devī dolī* (palanquin of the goddess) was supported by a bamboo with eleven nodes. The entire assemblage, the *Barma Thaṅkrā*, was infused with *praṇa* (energy) through herbs and mantras.

The interlocutors engaged in the elaborate rituals explained that the *farsa* (silver symbol of the *devī*) was kept in a copper pot into which was poured the milk of 101 cows, the soil of Maṇa village (the last Indian village in Uttarakhand), the water from various rivers, *jau* (barley) from Jaurasī village, *til* (sesame seeds) from the Tilwara region of Rudraprayag, and 101 herbs, all of which were mixed to the accompaniment of mantras. During the complicated rituals involving mantras, the pot appeared to vibrate and shake violently to the extent that the person holding it could not control it. That shaking suggested that the *devī* was now ready to travel and had given permission for the procession to begin (see Figure 7).

The *yagna kund* (where the fire worship is performed) is situated in the Maṇiguha



Figure 7: The silver face of goddess *Durgā* (here understood as *Kunwarikā*), which is made potent through esoteric mantras. In the local dialect, this face is known as *farsa* (Gairola 2021).

village in Uttarakhand's Rudraprayag district. Using the Garhwali dialect of Rudraprayag, people asked the *Barma Thaṅkrā* of the *devī* (Figure 3) where the *yagna kund* worship had been performed in 1927. People said to the *Barma Thaṅkrā*: "Please help us find your place, where your *yagna* took place. We are trying our best to find it." The *Barma Thaṅkrā* then got "charged" and began moving in different directions and finally tilted its head toward the correct place (Figure 8) while standing still. Finding the exact location of the *yagna* was one of the markers of the worship being successful. As people dug into the site indicated by the *Barma Thaṅkrā*, remnants of earlier *yagna* performances, including charcoal, were found. The finding of that



Figure 8: *Yagna kund* (the place for fire worship), where the final rites take place (Gairola 2021).

exact place marked the continuation of the ritual practice from 1927 and thus was potent and meaningful. As Jassal (2017) explained, it is through ritual enactment and instrumentalization of place that interaction with the divine is established.

The locals believe that the sign of a successful *yagna* is rainfall just before the end of the worship, a tradition they say goes back to the Vedic era. This is exactly what happened as the *yagna* was about to complete. It rained for three days continuously. Before that, the locals said rainfall had not occurred in the region for eight or nine months.

Rituals and Interaction with the *Devī*

This section illustrates how the rituals and interactions with the *devī* are located in the everyday context of needs, desires, and emotional well-being in the lives of the villagers in the Garhwal Himalaya. Every day, at different intervals, while the procession traveled from one village to the

other, *arowlā nāch*, a dance performance by a *Śiv gaṇ* to the beat of a *ḍholak*-like instrument known as *daundī* and a *ghantī* (a small copper plate struck with a small, thick wooden stick) at different intervals used to happen. The performance was devoid of any possession, but the village members were all enthusiastic about watching the *nāch* (dance). Even when a person moves their body during possession by any deity, one must ask, “Who is the Self that is dancing this dance?” (Sax 2002: 15). This also tells us about the relationship between the Self and the Other and the idea that they cannot be distinguished totally from each other (Sax 2002). The primary motivation of those who actively participate in the worship is that the *devī* is from their region or is coming to their region. Hence, identification with the region to which the *devī* or a person belongs becomes important. There are specific practices around pollution and purity that are followed. For instance, people were not allowed to touch the *Barma Ṭhañkrā* or the *Śiv gaṇ* as, in the latter case, it could “harm” them by disrupting their

protocol of holding the *Barma Thaṅkrā*. The *devī* blessed people belonging to the lower castes from a distance, a practice that received criticism from the general public.¹³

Sudhir Kakar writes, “There is a god for every psychic season, a myth for every hidden wish, and a legend for every concealed anxiety” (Kakar 2012). The ritual practices involved in the procession are connected to “body memory” (Sax and Polit 2012: 227), which is to say that such memory is not merely cognitive but an embodied experience of people belonging to a social group and a particular place. Experiencing an event can result in embodying it, just as Desjarlais (1992: 5) experienced a trance during his engagement with the Yolmo shamans in Nepal. Ritual processions thus perform two functions: creating and preserving memories (Sax and Polit 2012).

The *Śiv gaṇ*, *Bāldeo*, and the travelers who were with the *devī* predicted that the memory of the *devī* would remain fresh with them for a long time after the procession was over. As *Bāldeo* told the first author after the procession was complete, “The memory of the *devī* keeps coming back to me. It felt safe and comforting. Sometimes I feel like crying when I realize that the *yātrā* (pilgrimage) is over now. That separation feels overwhelming.” The *Śiv gaṇ* said they saw numerous villages they had known nothing about. Many people from other villages came to know about them. This could give them better employment opportunities, such as being a clerk at a school or a daily wage worker because being a *Śiv gaṇ* of the *devī* was a revered and respected position.¹⁴

Possession and dancing are also ways of transmitting cultural memory and collective knowledge. As the procession continued, the *Śiv gaṇ* embodied the skill of holding the *Barma Thaṅkrā*, jumping in the terrace fields, controlling their bodies in the state of possession, and dancing. They learned to dance to the beats of *dhol-damaun* while holding the *Barma Thaṅkrā*. From having initial difficulties maintaining their balance while holding the *Barma Thaṅkrā*

to jumping and running with it as days and months passed, they achieved “ritual mastery” (Bell 1992). Many devotees from different villages experienced possession either by their *īṣṭa devtā* (chosen deity) or *ban devtā* and *anchris* (forest deities) when they saw the *Barma Thaṅkrā*. A woman from Malkhi village said, “The *devī* has come to address our pains. My body moved automatically as the *devī* came near. The heart starts beating fast. It is the *devī* (pointing at the *Barma Thaṅkrā*) that sways us.” The power of deities is not only in the thoughts or words but in embodied images (Csordas 1977), which evoke the concrete presence of a deity.

Another woman who underwent possession and was a *dhiyān* (out-married woman)¹⁵ of the *Kunwarikā Devī* said, “We can see and feel the presence of the *devī* right in front of us. We don’t have to imagine a story; it is right there, dancing and giving blessings to us.” Many people became possessed upon seeing the *Śiv gaṇ* and *Barma Thaṅkrā*. Sometimes the *Śiv gaṇ* became possessed by the *devī*, and this was the most authentic and persuasive appearance of the *devī* for the devotees. The high-pitched shouting, shivering body, intense non-blinking eyes, and jumping body movements are the visible transformations a few of the *Śiv gaṇ* underwent. The most common response of the *Śiv gaṇ* was, “We feel more connected to the *devī*. In our dreams, we used to see what would happen the next day, and it used to happen. The *devī* guides us; otherwise, how would we be able to walk barefoot and fast for months?” The *Śiv gaṇ* said that the *Barma Thaṅkrā* moved on its own during many parts of the journey and that they were carried by it rather the other way around. The devotees said such possession confirms the power of the *devī*. The worship remains incomplete if it does not happen (Sax 2009).

With time, the relationship of the *Śiv gaṇ* with the goddess grew ever more intimate. She was their mother, and they carried her wherever they went. The separation from the *devī* after the worship was over was the most painful part for the *Śiv gaṇ*,

We have carried the *devī* for six months. Never were we in pain while holding the *Barma Thaṅkrā* despite the thorns inside our feet. Going back to our home without the *Devī* will be painful. As the end of the *yatrā* is coming closer, we feel like crying.

During the last day, when the *Śiv gaṇ* were separated from the *Barma Thaṅkrā* as it was buried in the ground, some of them fainted while all of them cried. The phenomenologist William James said that sensing bodily change is emotion (James 1884). Numerous devotees cried and got possessed by various deities. It was a site where iconography and social memory intersected as both the *Śiv gaṇ* and the devotees felt the separation in both a collective and embodied manner.

During the final days of the worship, people asked the *devī* (Figure 3) for forgiveness for any *bhool-chūk* (error/mistake) that might have occurred during the event. Around 55 lakh rupees were collected during the entire worship from 2019 to 2021, and the committee planned to build a new temple dedicated to the *Kunwarikā Devī*. Although people were wearing masks, social distancing was not followed. As a result, as the worship came to an end, Maṅguha village became a containment zone of COVID-19 with about 50 cases, and people in Bhattwari village, which is situated just below Maṅguha village, were also affected by the virus.

As the *yatrā* goes to hundreds of villages over varied terrain, across rivers, and through forests, people believe there is a danger of being afflicted by forests and river spirits. Therefore, a *balī* (sacrifice) is carried out on eight goats (seven for the *Śiv gaṇ* and *Bāldeo*) and one for the *dhol-damaun* players. The sacrifice takes place twice. First, when half of the procession is over, a sacrifice in a ritual known as *dwāri kundlī* (second turn of the procession) is made for the *farsa* (see Figure 7). Another is done after the participants come back from their last *yatrā*. The *dwāri kundlī* sacrifice occurred near a river, and the last sacrifice took place in the jungle of Maṅguha village.

Mr. Brijmohan Bhatt (the *barma* of the *devī*) and one interlocutor who knew *Mahāvidyā*¹⁶ said,

The spirits of forests and rivers that walk with the *devī*, known as *bayāl*, demand sacrifice, and we need to satisfy them. The people who walk with the *devī*, specially *Śiv gaṇ* and *Bāldeo* travel through various jungles and river bodies and are at risk of catching an affliction. Their safety is ensured by satisfying the spirits through sacrifice. This worship happens at night as it is a part of the secret knowledge based on *Mahāvidyā*. Before the sacrifice, goddess *Kālī*'s yantra is made on the ground and is worshiped through *Mahāvidyā* mantras. There is uncooked rice that is kept on the ear of the goat. If the goat shakes and nods, that symbolizes that the goat is ready for sacrifice. In the older times, everybody had goats, but there was not much food. Hence, sacrifice was also directly related to eating the flesh as food.

Additionally, the *Śiv gaṇ* and *Bāldeo* collectively understood that the sacrifice was made for them so that malevolent spirits would not afflict them. This is important because they are under the radar of the forest and river spirits for at least six months after the end of the procession.

In making sense of *Kunwarikā Devī*'s procession at the intersection of culture and society, Victor Turner's concept of "communitas" is useful. *Communitas* is a spontaneous experience of communion and openness to the other that goes beyond the structures of daily life (Turner 1969). Furthermore, "communitas" can be equated with Rolland's "oceanic feeling." Romain Rolland coined the term "oceanic feeling," which is a "spontaneous religious sentiment" having a subjective character, which is common to the millions of people who have experienced it (Rolland 2008). Events such as when the *Kunwarikā Devī* is brought outside for the *yatrā*, when she

reaches old temples having “sacred power,” and during the final days of the procession where separation with the *devī* comes to the fore, result in, to quote Dewey, a “complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events (as cited in McDermott 1981: 540). This “oceanic” “sense of unison” lasting for a few seconds is “no more than a shiver running down the back at a certain point” (d’Aquili et al. 1979: 177), a merger of self and other. Interestingly, most people who underwent possession in our study used the word *kampan*, which denotes trembling or vibration, to describe their experience. Possession by a deity is not a belief but a part of the worship practice. It is not a cognitive phenomenon but an embodied reality that goes beyond mere belief (Luhmann 2020).

The deities act as mediators between the materialistic and metaphysical worlds. Movement within the space of gods who have king-like statures has a specific pattern (Sax 2000). Here, it is not a king but a *devī* who asserts her agency in a particular space. The difference between pan-Hindu gods such as Śiva and Viṣṇu and local deities like *Kunwarikā* is their material presence in a village or a specific region as someone who interacts with the people, i.e., is visible and active in the everyday.

Rituals, music, dance, and drama emerge through narratives in the Garhwal region (Purohit 2001; 2006). A story of the emergence of a deity gives birth to grand and lasting rituals, which are religious, cultural, and social events. Community organization takes place through religious values. *Kunwarikā Devī* is referred to as *śānt* (calm). The mountainous notion of divinity and its associated religious experience has changed because of a revised understanding of what is considered better (Sharabi and Shalev 2016). The element of nostalgia informs a lot of musical compositions and textual material of Uttarakhand (Dinnerstein and Alter 2018). This nostalgia and migration, understood as “dislocation” (Fiol 2018) from the homeland, reinforces the worship of deities, which become symbolic of village life and of being connected to the *dev bhūmi* “land of

the Gods.” The Garhwalis identify with “the sentiment of dislocation and cultural loss” as every person in Garhwal has a family member or a friend who has left home due to marriage or in search of employment. Displacement is thus to be understood in the form of migration and out-marriage in Uttarakhand, as in much of the Himalayan region (Fiol 2018). In Bhattwari village, only three older women were permanent residents of the village, and similar situations pertained in numerous villages where the *devī* went. The internal catharsis, the feelings of being *bhāva vibhor* (overwhelmed), is linked to the nostalgic regional connection, thus revitalizing the community bond.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the multiple meanings and significance of a worship practice that took place after 92 years. Organizational challenges such as forming a procession committee, bringing the viewpoints of different villages together, and solving disputes about customary rights over the worship delayed the event for many years. These ritual processions have given rise to several dances and songs. In essence, such processions link people to places and connect places. It happens through the story of the *devī*, imagery, and traveling to different villages. These traditions are constantly revitalized and transformed in terms of their logistics and presentation. As the worship takes place, the past comes back, and the grandeur of the ancestral worship of the *devī* holds much potency. Sometimes, it is performative as people sing in praise of the *devī*, and sometimes it gets “real” as the *Barma Thaṅkrā* moves and possession by different *devtās* occurs, but this “real” is not sustained for too long. The worship practice has a transcendental grandeur, but the motivation behind these practices is not transcendental. As Sax (2003) also recognized, it has to do with honor and prestige. The recognition that the *Śiv gaṇ*, *Bāldeo*, organizing committee, and the host villages get from the larger community is a potent reinforcer of arranging such processions despite significant challenges

in their execution. The assemblage of Vedic *pūja*, possession, movement of the *Barma Thaṅkrā*, and sacrifice in *Kunwarikā Devī* worship can broaden and diversify how scholars of Himalaya understand the correspondence between pan-Hindu traditions and vernacular aspects.

The *devī-devtās* (Hindu deities) are intimately involved in the daily lives of the entire community. The origin of a natural water source named *Riknaū Dhārā* is attributed to *Kunwarikā Devī*. Culture is therefore shaped by what nature provides and vice-versa. The *devī* is then linked with the daily needs and requirements of the entire community. Hence, deities are crucial not only for cultural meaning-making but also for establishing connections with nature. People communicate with the *devī* about their pain and suffering, and the *Barma Thaṅkrā* (palanquin of the goddess) responds by shaking and tilting (Figure 3). The symbolic and material presence of the divine force acts as a nurturing mother. However, she is also taken care of as a child, especially when devotional songs are sung about the *kanyā* (child) form of the goddess and offerings such as small bangles are given. During the final days of the worship event, people come from all the regions where the *Kunwarikā Devī* went, forming meaningful memories that bind the community together. Through the worship, people mark a return to their homeland from far-off urban spaces, and a community feeling marked with nostalgia is generated.

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Endnotes

1. As a processional journey starts, a deity travels from one village to the other in four different directions (North, South, East, and West). This journey of a deity to different villages and regions where people greet the deity either in the temple of their village, *chowk* (quadrangle) of their homes, or in the *panchāyat chowk* (quadrangle of the village council) is known as *devarā*.
2. The first author met Prof. Data Ram Purohit in his home in Srinagar in January 2022 and April 2022 and at the Chandikā Devī procession in June 2022. Prof. Purohit highlighted the significance of such processional journeys for community engagement and stated that empathy with the deities and the people involved played a central function in the emotional bonding of the Garhwali community.
3. After completion of the processional journey of the Chandikā Devī of any region, a *yagna* (fire worship) takes place for nine days in the *Barmatolī* (where the end rites are performed). The *Barma Ṭhañkrā* of the *devī* is snatched from the group of people who hold it, who are known as *arowlā* or *Śiv gaṇ*. It is buried downhill from the *Barmatolī*. This nine-day process is referred to as *banyāt* (see Benjwal 2022: 26–28).
4. The word *thañkrā* refers to a long piece of wood buried in the ground to support the vine of a gourd or pumpkin. As the four-sided palanquin is fixed onto a bamboo having eleven nodes, it is also referred to as *thañkrā*. The palanquin on top of the bamboo has four sides because it symbolizes Lord Brahma (*Barma*, in Garhwali). Inside the palanquin are herbs, water from different rivers, and idols of the *devī* made of different metals. The entire *Barma Ṭhañkrā* is covered with a *saree* (a long piece of cloth worn by South Asian women; in this case, it is usually red or yellow) (see Figures 1 and 2). The *Barma Ṭhañkrā* as a whole is referred to as a *niśān* (sign) of the *Kunwarikā Devī*.
5. See Ranganathan (2015a) for an elaboration on the communal and social aspects

of healing, albeit in a different geographical and ritual context, namely, the Mahānubhāv temples in Maharashtra. She illustrates how access to the Mahānubhāv community and sect are crucial aspects of healing.

6. *Prasād* is what the deity returns to the worshiper after an offering has been made.
7. The mixture of herbs such as *Jatamansi* (*Nardostachys jatamansi*), *Bhootkeshi* (*Selinum vaginatum*), *Kanthla* (*Polygonum amplexicaulis*), *Salampanja* (*Dactylorhiza hatageria*), *Ativisha* (*Aconitum heterophyllum*) and hundreds of other plants is said to make the *Barma Ṭhañkrā* (palanquin) light in weight and easier to carry.
8. The seven men dressed in white pajamas and *ghāgrā* (a long full skirt with a yellow or red cloth around the waist) with their faces covered are known as *Śiv gaṇ* or *arowlā* (see Figure 1). They are referred to as the brothers of the *devī*. They are accompanied by a boy child or a teenage boy dressed in yellow clothes who holds the symbol of *Bāldeo*—the child form of Lord Viṣṇu, specifically Kṛṣṇa (see Figure 6). The child is referred to as *Bāldeo*.
9. According to local legend, in the vedic time, gods had a dispute about who would conduct the *yagna* (fire worship). Hence, Lord Brahma appointed *Dakṣa Prajāpatī* to conduct *yagna*. He omitted to invite his youngest daughter Satī and Śiva, who was her husband. Satī went to her father to ask for the reason, and he insulted Śiva. As a result, she jumped into the fire of the *yagna*. Śiva was filled with feelings of loss of his beloved and anger at the incident. He carried the burnt body of Satī and went to different regions. Seeing this, Kṛṣṇa used his *Sudarśan Chakra* to cut her body into 51 parts, which fell onto the earth in different places and are now worshiped as sacred sites. Near the *yagna* site, a mud statue of *Dakṣa Prajāpatī* is made during the *Banyāt* of the *Chandikā Devī* (*Kunwarikā* is also one of the forms of the *Chandikā*). Satī in the Garhwali region is locally known as *Chandikā*.
10. The first author was told by the Kunwars and Raṇa family members that their ancestors came toward Garhwal from Ujjain,

Madhya Pradesh, during the ninth century with King Kanak Pal.

11. The person who imbues the *farsa* (face of the *devī* carved on wood and covered with silver) and the *Barma Ṭhañkrā* (see Figures 6 and 1, respectively) with the “power of the *devī*” is known as *barma*. The entire process consists of lengthy and exhausting rituals and mantras. As the *barma* knows the workings of the *devī* and her power, he occupies a respected status in the community.

12. *Śiv gaṇ* must use white clothes like *jhagulī* (braided white), and *Bāldeo* (child form of Lord Viṣṇu) must wear yellow. In this way, they retain a distinctive identity during the journey. They fast throughout the day and eat a special meal made by designated people in the evening.

13. It should be mentioned here that this worship is not a practice that is equally available and accessible to all, for a lineage-based goddess provides prestige and honor to her higher-caste devotees, but worshipers belonging to lower castes lie at the margins of the event.

14. Much more could be said about this aspect, but it is beyond the scope of this paper, and hence we do not elaborate here.

15. As the six organizing villages are considered to be the active region of the *Kunwarikā Devī*, the women belonging to that region play a crucial role by organizing tea breaks in their respective homes for the *yatrā* team. After their marriage, they are referred to as *dhiyān* of the maternal home, village, and the *devī* (Sax 1990). They are respected and revered by the maternal family members. Wherever the daughters of these six villages marry, the *Kunwarikā Devī* goes to the villages to ask for *Kuśal chem* (well-being) of her *dhiyān*.

16. The *Mahāvidyā* are ten Hindu tantric goddesses: *Kālī*, *Tārā*, *Tripurā Sundarī*, *Bhuvaneśvarī*, *Chhinnamastā*, *Bhairavī*, *Dhumavatī*, *Bagalāmukhī*, *Mātaṅgī*, and *Kamālā* (Lalita Prasad Purohit, Personal Communication, April 2022).

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