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# Denouncing the Lack of Belief. Forms of Meta-Reflexivity about Ritual Failures in Garhwal

Serena Bindi

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## Cross-cutting South Asian Studies

# Cross-cutting South Asian Studies

## An Interdisciplinary Approach

*edited by*

**Serena Bindi**  
**Elena Mucciarelli**  
**Tiziana Pontillo**



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## 1.5

### Denouncing the Lack of Belief Forms of Meta-Reflexivity about Ritual Failures in Garhwal

*Serena Bindi*

IN the course of the last ten years, anthropological scholarship on ritual has emphasized how religious ideas and actions become the object of reflection among the people participating in ritual activities (Højbjerg 2002 (a;b;c); Rozenberg 2011). These works on ritual and religious reflexivity have shown that doubt, incertitude and "do as if" are among the elements most commonly associated with the reflexive attitudes about ritual. (Berti 2014; Boyer 1994; Bonhomme 2005; Højbjerg 2002a; Rappaport 1999).

The matter of ritual failures, when actors do not get the expected results from ritual action, closely relates to the theme of reflexivity and the issue of scepticism. A collective volume edited in 2007 by Ute Hüsken shows how failures are indeed one of the main occasions which have the power to generate reflexivity on ritual and religion. Ritual failures can be seen as catalysers of reflexive dynamics underlying ceremonial performances as they relaunch the vernacular reflection on ritual performance.

Binding together the subject of reflexivity and that of ritual failures, this article aims at presenting forms of ritual *meta-reflexivity*: explanations to ritual failure which, while recognizing the presence of reflexive attitudes such as doubt and scepticism toward ritual, deplore and contain them. These forms of reflexivity are found in commentaries and explanations to unsuccessful healing

rituals in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. Here doubt, lack of faith, and scepticism are often invoked as causes for ritual failures. These forms of reasoning can be seen as forms of *meta-reflexivity* since they offer a critical reflection about people's reflexive attitudes on and about ritual, such as scepticism and lack of belief.

#### **Meta-Reflexivity in Garhwal**

The ethnographic data which form the basis of this reflection were collected from the area of the Garhwal Himalayas, located in the north Indian state of Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand became an autonomous state within the Federal Republic of India in November 2000. The majority of its population lives in rugged mountainous areas, which constitute the larger part of its territory. The areas of focus of this research include the small town of Uttarkashi, administrative centre of the eponym district; and some small villages, all located in between 2,000 and 2,900 m altitude, in the high valley of the Bhāgīrathī River, known in the plains below as the Ganges. Hindu religion and culture are largely dominant in the area. The villages where the research was carried out are inhabited by several caste groups ranging from Brāhmaṇa and Rājput<sup>1</sup> to Dalit sub-castes. The regional economy is based on subsistence agriculture, on remittances of those who have migrated to the plains, on activities linked to the increasing presence of tourists and pilgrims in the area and, to a lesser extent, on animal herding and husbandry. In colonial times, this area was never subjected to the direct control of the British and remained a separate Hindu kingdom under the name of Garhwal.<sup>2</sup> Thus the region was relatively isolated,

<sup>1</sup> The term *rājput* refers in Garhwal to the class of warriors (Kṣatriyas). High castes (Brāhmaṇas and Rājput) form the 69 % of the state population. These castes still have control over economic resources, in spite of the government's efforts to improve the social and economic condition of the lower castes: Scheduled Castes (SCs or Dalits) and those called Other Backward Classes. These castes are still deprived in many different respects (Kumar 2001).

<sup>2</sup> This is an analytical simplification, useful for this paper's purpose, of a →

until the 1960s when, as a result of India's so-called "Border War" with China in 1962, the main trans-regional infrastructure was built, while private and public development schemes followed in the wake of military use. In the last five decades, social and economic changes have been swift and profound. Nevertheless, despite these changes, Uttarakhand remains one of the five poorest states of India.<sup>3</sup> The economic condition of the state and especially of its northern districts was made ever more problematic by the recent cloudburst which, in June 2013, caused catastrophic floods and landslides which strongly affected the area of this study.

I conducted here several ethnographic researches over a period of ten years: a two-years long fieldwork was carried out between 2004 and 2007, an additional investigation was carried out in 2011 and one last fieldwork was done at the beginning of 2014. The research focused on ritual healing practices involving possession by deities and other entities. The methodology consisted of participant observation of the everyday life of villagers; observation and filming of healing sessions; and informal and semi-structured interviews with a large number of people belonging to all castes and having different roles within the ritual processes. Healing choices, séances of possession, and their outcome were commented together with subjects belonging to different castes and to different age, gender and class groups.

One striking outcome of the research was the way in which, during verbal exchanges within séances of possession as well as during interviews with healers and locals, people often attributed ritual failures to scepticism and doubt. This paper will focus on these explanations and the different forms they take.

← complex history of the Garhwali kingdom and the complicated vicissitudes of the Panwar dynasty which governed the area since the thirteenth century. For more on the history of Garhwal, see Rawat (1989).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank (2002).

### Consulting a Deity, Getting a Solution

Among the many rituals which dot everyday life in Garhwal, one important place is occupied by the forms of interactions where an entity that belongs to the invisible world "presentifies" itself (Vernant 1983)<sup>4</sup> in a human body. The expression locally used to refer to this action is "the deity goes on him/her" (*devatā us pe ātā hai*). After a period of illness and/or wired behaviour, a person sometimes has his symptoms and behaviours considered as a sign of the presence of a deity. He or she may then gradually become an official medium of this deity. Anthropologists often refer to this phenomenon with the term possession.<sup>5</sup> The expression "institutional possession" refers to forms of possession which are desired and organized and which are practised by people who are considered the official possessed or medium of a specific spiritual entity. Three main kinds of institutional forms of possession are present in Garhwal. They can be classified on the basis of the kind of relation which unites, in each form of possession, the medium to the deity who possesses him/her. This relation can be a familiar link (a member of the family possessed by a god or goddess of his lineage, *kuladevī-devatā*), a territorial one (a member of the village being possessed, usually in a hereditary way, by the village deity or *grāma devī-devatā*),<sup>6</sup> or "elective" (where a person is chosen by a deity for different reasons). All of these

<sup>4</sup> The expression translates from the French word *présentifier*. This term is used by J.-P. Vernant (1983) to indicate the action or process by which an entity that belongs to the invisible world takes form in the human world.

<sup>5</sup> The term possession is used here to refer to the cases in which people claim that a "power" takes hold of a human being (Berti and Tarabout 2010). For a detailed description of the landscape of possession in Garhwal see Bindi (2009). For a general overview of the different forms of possession in South Asia, see Assayag and Tarabout (1999), Carrin (1999), and Smith (2006).

<sup>6</sup> This last practice probably plays the most important role in the ordinary life of people in Garhwal. It is linked to a complex system of ritual jurisdictions. Each village occupies a space which belongs to a specific deity. Its villagers are then considered to be ritual subjects of this deity (Bindi 2009, 2012).



mediums are considered, when possessed, as being able to give divination and healing. Virtually all events are brought before the mediums to be provided with meaning and, in the case of problematic events, with a solution. Such events range from physical illness to unusual individual behaviours, emotional distress, household disagreements, subsistence practices, disputes between neighbours or relatives over land tenure, natural catastrophes, and sudden deaths. The communication between a deity and the people can happen in different ways. Village deities most often communicate through a wooden palanquin – called *ḍolī* – which constitutes a mobile form of the deity. Two mediums of the deity take this palanquin on their shoulders: at this point the deity enters their bodies, which in turn start to move. The two mediums' body movements make the palanquin itself swing in different directions. These movements of the palanquin are regarded as a special language through which the deity expresses its will, which can only be understood by an elite group of knowledgeable people who “translate” it for the public.<sup>7</sup> Other forms of communication can be used by village deities and by the other deities: when possessed, the mediums (*paśuā* or *baki*) may talk directly with the people or they may use some other supports, most often rice or a ritual drum (*ḍoal*).

### Ritual Failures

Whereas all rituals can be considered to have an intrinsic purpose,<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The entire institution is controlled by the villages' hegemonic groups, which in the past were linked to the central royal power and which belong to the two upper castes of Brāhmaṇas and Rājput̥s.

<sup>8</sup> The issue of the goal-oriented nature of ritual does not only concern rituals of possession, but every form of ritual. Indeed, every ritual, being a form of action, has an intrinsic aim and is directed toward a purpose. To view rituals as action might seem to be an obvious remark. Nevertheless, as Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (2006: 265) point out, it has been a comparatively rare starting point for analysis both among general theorists and among anthropologists and historians who have sought to understand specific rituals. The most important reason for this

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Garhwali rituals of possession have the particularity that people often expect an immediate outcome, either in the form of a divination or a healing effect. As a consequence, the question of ritual efficacy is particularly prominent and the issue of efficacy is central to discourses about these rituals. During and after performances of possession, the participants themselves actively discuss the question of ritual efficacy, the possible positive or negative outcome of the rituals, and possible reasons for any failures.

As observed by Schieffelin (2007) many discussions on ritual failure are made complicate by analytical confusion. Researchers in religious studies and anthropology of religion have often failed to clarify the extent to which their own perspective and that of ritual actors coincide and have tended to use the category of failure inappropriately. The discourse of success or failure is not always relevant and may not be applicable in some occurrences which, according to the researcher, alter the course of a ritual or make it look different. Rather, it is important to ethnographically explore the idea of failure as it is used and conceived within the culture under investigation.

In this paper I am concerned with failures which are defined as such by the actors themselves or, to put it in the terms proposed by Pike (1954), which are *emically* defined as such.<sup>9</sup>

← is probably, as Humphrey and Laidlaw aptly emphasize, the influence on social sciences of the Durkeimian view of ritual as essentially a means of communication, through which “society” somehow or other speaks to the individuals and in which participants are unwitting transmitters and ultra-receptive receivers. As shown by William Sax in his introduction to “The Problem of Ritual Efficacy” (Sax 2010: 3-16) the “representational theory” of ritual has often produced the tendency to interpret ritual in terms of what symbolizes, represents or expresses rather than what it actually does. To analyse rituals as expressing inner states or symbolizing theological ideas, or representing psychological states has brought about the neglect of ritual efficacy or how they might be instrumental actions.

<sup>9</sup> In the beginning of the 1950s, the linguist Pike (1954) proposed to transpose the opposition elaborated by linguistics between phonemic and

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In Garhwal, people would express this idea of failure with the words “it did not work” or “there was no benefit (*fāyadā*)”.

One such case concerned Deepa, a brāhmaṇa girl who fell ill in 2005. Her symptoms manifested through pain in various parts of her body, sometimes toothaches, sometimes stomachaches, and other times pain in her legs. The pains were sharp and lasted only about five to ten minutes. After two weeks, as the girl’s symptoms continued, her family decided to consult the village deity, Coraṅgī Devatā. Interrogated through its palanquin, the deity ordered the performance of a ritual (called *rakhvālī*<sup>10</sup>) to extract a ghost from the girl’s body. This ceremony took place at night and was orchestrated by several village and lineage deities’ mediums and by the palanquin of the village deity. During a fairly violent ritual, many of the people present – the girl’s family members, the mediums, and the priests of the village deity, other mediums – all tried to convince (both with words and with physical violence) the ghost to disclose its identity and to leave the girl’s body. Spurred by the insistence of the mediums and frightened of the glowing iron rod used to fight it, the ghost – talking through the body of Deepa – disclosed its identity and then declared it would leave. After the session, Deepa’s mother and older sister took her into her parents’ bedroom where she would sleep in their bed between them that night. Everyone present then went to sleep as it was very late. The episode seemed to be over, but a few days later, Deepa experienced another attack. She was taken to the hospital, this time with intense stomach pains. The doctors hospitalized her for four days, after which Deepa returned to the village. She took different types of biomedical remedies for

← phonetic to cultural analysis. Applied to cultural and social studies this distinction takes the form of emic–etic. The emic concerns the collect of local cultural meanings, connected to the point of view of actors. The etic implies an external observation of human behaviour, independent from the meaning which local actors attribute to their own actions.

<sup>10</sup> The term literally means “protection” or “the act of taking care of someone”.

gastritis, in both liquid and tablet forms. After two months the girl still wasn’t getting better. While at school in the nearby village of Ghianj, she would often be struck by unexpected pains that worried her classmates and teachers. She also manifested strange behaviour. She would stand up and scream suddenly, during classes, and seem not to hear her teachers and classmates. She underwent two more healing rituals. Nevertheless, when I met her in January 2007, the case was still not solved.

Another unsuccessful attempt to heal concerned a 35-years old man, living in the district’s main city of Uttarkashi. Affected by lung-problems, the man regularly came since 2006 to consult the palanquin of the village deity Kandhār and ask about his lung problems. He performed all the rituals, public and domestic, ordered by the deity. Nevertheless the man failed to recover and was hospitalized in the district clinic in the winter 2007 with the diagnosis of lung cancer. He died there after few months.

A third case involved a 50-year old lady living in Uttarkashi with her son Sandeep who is a biology teacher in the local college. In 2011, she received in the district hospital the diagnosis of throat cancer. For two years her son Sandeep had been struggling to heal her. He listened to the divinatory verdicts of his village deity Kandhār and performed the ceremonies prescribed by the deity. At the same time, he had also visited a few local oracles, which gave amulets and also ordered some rituals to get rid of a malevolent entity disturbing his mother’s body. But all of these healing techniques were vane. In winter 2013 Sandeep’s mother died.

### Explaining Ritual Failures by Denouncing Doubt

Discussions about these and other similar ritual failures were recorded among priests, mediums, patients, and their relatives, villagers of different gender, caste, and age. In many cases, these explanations justified the failure of ritual through the discursive strategy of denouncing scepticism and lack of faith in deities and their power to heal. In other words, explanations to the

ineffectiveness of these rituals often made space to meta-reflexivity, or reflection about the ways people performing rituals feel and reflect about ritual, healing, and religion. This type of meta-reflexivity took three main forms.

#### THE FLUID IDENTITY OF DEITIES

The first discourse focused on the idea that in these healing processes people did things correctly but without real trust and faith. This weakens the healing power of deities which appears to be related to people's subjective attitude towards them.

According to Ragvendra, a 28-year old journalist at a local Uttarkashi newspaper, healing rituals as the one executed for Deepa do not always work nowadays, due to the subjective attitudes of ritual performers. People don't have enough trust in local deities (*devī-devatā*), thus making those deities less strong.

There was a time when our deity Kandhār was very strong. Even today, if we have a question in mind, the palanquin of the deity approaches us and gives us the answer to what we are wondering. But today's people want to test the deity. They do this by hiding a piece of paper in their house and asking the palanquin to find it. When the palanquin finds it, the person is convinced and has faith (*viśvāsa*) in the deity and goes on to consult the palanquin about a personal problem. If in our hearts we have faith (*śraddhā*) in the *devatā*, we can avail ourselves of his power. The whole world is generated by this power. But our elders say that today our deity does not have as much power as it once had. This is because of a lack of faith . . . and the fact that the places of the deity are often contaminated by actions . . . which are wrong.

These words demonstrate how the failure of a ritual is justified by denouncing doubt. This discourse connects the loss of trust to the diminished power of deities, which in turn makes the ritual ineffective. This notion is consistent with the shared idea that deities change their identity, according to the kind of feeling and worship they get from people.

The fluidity of the identity of deities has been compellingly emphasized by many anthropological studies concerning the practice of Hinduism in the Indian subcontinent. Scholars have shown how people tend to classify the same deity in different ways, according to their social status and the ways they relate to the deity (Berti 2001: 89-113; Nichter 1977: 141). Moreover, as Trawick writes, a deity's identity is the most flexible when the deity is very involved in human affairs.

In the protean environment of South Asian culture, deities, like many other entities, are highly "context variable" and especially when they enter into close relations with particular human beings is this so.  
– Trawick 1984: 24

This can also be observed in Garhwal. The category of local deities – *devī-devatā* – is the one which is most involved in human affairs, through possession, divination, and healing. And it is this same category which is subject to the greatest flexibility. One such example is that of Pokku. In the village of Mukkhba, located close to Gaṅgotrī, Pokku is the lineage divinity of the Rājput Negi family. Thanks to the family's divinatory practices Pokku however acquired fame and respect amongst the local brāhmaṇa majority. Pokku's identity oscillates fluidly depending on the perspective of the person talking about him. He is sometimes referred to as brave hero (*bīr/vīra*), a helper (*gaṇa*) to the God Śiva, a demon (*rākṣasa*), or a ghost (*bhūta*).

It is important to underline that in Garhwal, the fluidity of local deities is not only an aspect which seizes the external analyst, but is also a topic of local speculations about the ultimate nature of *devī-devatā* identity and about the way people's attitudes toward deities can change this nature. Local theories stress the fact that local deities may change their identity according to the kind of devotion they receive.

Another similar link between the nature of a deity and the type of devotion this deity receives is found in the farthest western zone of Garhwal near its border with Himachal Pradesh. Here the

cult of the god Pokku has grown to encompass several villages in the district where the divinity was known as god of justice (*nyāya devatā*). Nevertheless, according to several informants, nowadays the deity seems to adjust to the changed nature of people's requests and has become "spoiled" by their animal offerings, mainly goats. As a consequence he no longer cares about justice but undertakes every action in order to satisfy his own hunger.

This is how Anil Negi, who is a priest and a medium of the deity Pokku, justifies the ambiguity of his deity who does both good deeds and harmful actions:

God (*Bhagvān*) says that "whatever type of feeling (*bhāva*) you will have for me, I shall present myself in a way conforming to that feeling".<sup>11</sup> The same applies for Pokku. If you consider him as a god (*devatā*), then you give him vegetarian offerings (*phala phūla*), whereas if you consider him as a demon (*rākṣasa*), you offer him an animal sacrifice (*bali*). In certain villages such as Netwar, Pokku got used to committing wicked acts to whom would request it in exchange for animal offerings (*bali*). This is the reason why he became increasingly ravenous with time. As he gradually consumed more and more animal sacrifices, his nature became increasingly closer to that of a demon, although I personally consider him as Śivajī's helper (*gaṇa*).

– Interview with Anil Negi, Mukhbwa, October 2006

In this context, deities change their identity according to worshippers' attitude. This also implies that when they are not worshipped with enough faith, deities may change their nature and become unwilling or unable to help people.

In another village, Senj, a Rājput lady in her 50s emphasized how people's faith used to, in the past, render the village god Kandhār more "communicative":

Before, our deity was able to do many more things through his palanquin. He used to draw letters on the ground with his umbrella

<sup>11</sup> This sentence refers to a famous passage of *Bhagavad-Gītā*, a very important text for Hindus, which is contained within the epic *Mahābhārata*.

in order to write down his story, his biography. The deity could tell many things in this way. But now people believe less, so gods have less power (*śakti*).<sup>12</sup>

– Interview with Sarojni Rana, Senj, May 2007

These words highlight the way in which the lack of belief is both simultaneously denounced and given a moral judgement: people don't have faith so they have weakened the deity.

#### BREAKING THE RULE OF RECIPROCITY

A second explanation centres on the idea that deities, rather than losing their power to heal, actively refuse to heal due to people's lack of faith and consequent misbehaviour. Ritual failures can be attributed not only to the diminished power of deities (impotence resulting from people's lack of faith), but also to overtly malevolent actions by divinities seeking to reiterate their right (*adhikāra*) and punish those who ignore it. In representations and recounts about the kind of relationship the faithful should ideally have with their deities, a form of reciprocity is always present. Local deities are interested in villagers' destinies (their palanquin is made of "living wood" and speaks like a "living rooster") and read the hearts of people who, in turn, worship them. Nevertheless, due to lack of devotion, people tend to forget their duties toward local deities and break this fundamental rule governing the interaction between deities and human beings. This brings about malevolent actions by the deities. In the words of a local village teacher, of a brāhmaṇa family:

<sup>12</sup> Although this idea is often present, the nature of this relationship between deities' identity and human actions is not theorized in clear ways. Moreover, there is not always a shared agreement in Garhwal on the fact that the humans, with their actions, are able to influence the nature of a deity and conversely on the fact that deities really need human action to live and maintain themselves. The coexistence of differing opinions about this relationship - which often reflect differences in people's status and education - has been recorded throughout a variety of South Asian contexts as well as in Hindu classical scriptures and commentaries (Fuller 2004; Eck 1998).

Here in Garhwal there are many deities because we have deep feelings (*goorda*) and emotion (*bhāva*) for them. Because of this, we trust our deities and we take refuge in our god (*devatā kā śaroṇ*). When someone is sick . . . they go directly to see the deity. We do not give much merit to doctors and hospitals. If we have faith, we will be healed. If the deity has given its blessings (*āśīrvāda*) and if we have trust and faith (*śraddhā* or *viśvāsa*), then our illness will go away. Diseases, disagreements between us, and poor harvests are problems that often happen because of lack of trust. If the deities do not receive celebration (*pūjā*), prayer, or consideration then they make problems, in order to get it right away.

– Interview with Permanand Nautyal, Sangrali, April 2007

Use of alcohol or consumption of meat, the desecration of holy places in the forest, or the unrestrained vice of mediums who ask for money in exchange for divination: these are all considered signs of indifference which break the rule of reciprocity. This provokes the reaction of the deities which is, in practice, a form of participation in the reciprocity to which they are entitled.

An example often cited when talking about loss of reciprocity was a fact that happened in April 2007 in one of the district's villages. At that time, no offering was made to the spiritual female entities called *māṭṛi* before the grain harvest. These entities, who inhabit the fields, hills and forests, became angry. They took what was due to them by creating a strong hailstorm which, in only a few hours, destroyed the wheat that was ready for harvest. And although after all a ritual was performed, it could not stop the hailstorm.

Another example occurred on an occasion when villagers attempted to organize a ritual dance called Pāṇḍav Nīrti on a different day than the one specified by the village deity and forgot to open *tatti* (a place, at the center of the village, which is itself considered a female deity). This caused a drenching rain on the starting day of the dance. Moreover, when the village deity's palanquin was consulted, the priest standing beside the palanquin

fell down and remained trapped for several minutes under its weight.

This explanation can be combined with the previous one as the words which have been reported above show:

This is because the lack of faith and the fact that the places of the deity are often contaminated by actions . . . that are wrong.

#### BIOMEDICINE

There is a third area in which the notions of faith and doubt are activated in relation to ritual efficacy. Whereas the cases referenced above involve a dual relationship between deities and people, biomedicine calls for the tripartite participation of the deities, people and doctors. The rapport to biomedicine in Garhwal is often equivocal. It emerged from discussions with local actors that the deities and doctors' respective healing systems often come across as complementary. Distinctive fields of competence are assigned to each system on the basis of whether the source of the illness is natural or if its origin is considered to be supernatural. As such the healing power of local deities is continuously legitimized despite the increased diffusion of biomedicine. In other occurrences, however, the coexistence between ritual healing and biomedicine is considered as more problematic. Deities' healing power (*śakti*) is at times referred to in nostalgic terms and their diminished capacity to heal is blamed on the spread of biomedicine (Bindi 2012). Priests and locals often invoke this reason to explain and justify ritual failures such as healing ceremonies which remain unsuccessful over time and after numerous attempts. When a problem persists, it is often explained by the use of a circular feedback loop in discourses. As people increasingly adhere more and more to a "modern lifestyle" and resort more and more to "modern" healing practices, their faith in deities diminishes and leads them to forget their ritual obligations towards the deities. As a consequence, the local deities' power to heal – which is considered to be based on reciprocal exchange between belief and celebration on the people's side and the bestowing of bliss

and healing by the deities – is weakened. The deities' reduced healing power results in increased occurrences of ritual failures which leads to more demand for biomedicine. Biomedicine has thus broken the rule of reciprocity on which the moral economy of ritual is based, as explained above.

### The Need for Devotion

Considering that Hinduism is often defined as a religion of orthopraxy,<sup>13</sup> where people are more concerned with action than with feelings, doctrine, and belief (Babb 1975; Madam 2012; Lipner 1994; Michaels 2005),<sup>14</sup> this insistence on belief is striking. As noted by Lawrence Babb in his classical study on the practice of popular Hinduism, Hindu religion is not a thing believed but done.

There is practically nothing to be gained in questioning Chhattisgarhi informants about what they believe, for this is simply not the primary context in which religious matters are understood. In Chhattisgarh religion is a thing done, not a thing “believed”, and as a result any effort to uncover the assumptions and principles underlying this religious system must seek them in ritual activity. – Babb 1975: 31

<sup>13</sup> Orthopraxy, a term derived from Greek meaning “correct action/activity”, is descriptive of religions that emphasize conduct, both ethical and liturgical, as opposed to faith or grace.

<sup>14</sup> Madam states that “Hinduism is characterized more by what people do than by what they believe and is, therefore, often described as a way of life rather than a cosmology or theology. What people do is highly context specific, depending on whom the actor is and in what place and time he or she is placed.” (Madam 2012: 518). Lipner also underlines how “Although Hindus were traditionally noted for their doctrinal tolerance they have not been perceived as tolerant in the practice of their religion. Hindus have always been far more rigid with respect to orthopraxy ('doing the right thing/behaving in the accredited way') than orthodoxy ('believing the right doctrine(s)')” (Lipner 1994: 189). Axel Michaels observes how “The primary principle of Indian religiosity is not to be sought in beliefs, doctrines, or rituals, but rather in the socioreligious organization” (Michaels 2005: 19).

Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between belief as the content of knowledge or ideas and belief as an attitude or state of mind of trust and devotion toward something and someone.

In the contexts we have been analysing, the words employed are either *viśvāsa* or *śraddhā*, or both together. According to the Platts dictionary (1884) the first meaning of *viśvāsa* is “trust and confidence”, while that of *śraddhā* is “faith”. Nevertheless, the two concepts are clearly related and indeed if we consider the complete list of meanings given by the dictionary the two words seem quite equivalent.<sup>15</sup>

When used nowadays in contexts of religious reflexivity in Garhwal, *viśvāsa* and *śraddhā* are employed, in most cases, in an almost synonymical way, to refer to the relationship between people and local deities. As such, their meaning is really close to that of the term *bhakti*, employed less often, namely an emotional attitude of love, faith, trust, and confidence toward a deity. As observed by Hara (1964) in a careful philological study on the occurrences of *śraddhā* and *bhakti* in Sanskrit literature, these two terms refer in the texts to different religious attitudes. While *śraddhā* has an impersonal and intellectual nature and refers to a state of mind directed toward objects or objective qualities in a human being, *bhakti* has a personal and emotional connotation and denotes a

<sup>15</sup> *śraddhā*, s.f. Faith, belief, trust, confidence, reliance, credit; calmness or composure of mind; intimacy; respect, reverence; hope, wish, vehement desire, the longing of a pregnant woman; purity: – *śraddhā-rahit*, adj. (f. -ā), Destitute of faith, unbelieving, &c.: – *śraddhā-kṛit*, part. Done in faith: – *śraddhā-may*, adj. Full of faith, believing: – *śraddhānvit* (°dhā+an°), adj. Endowed with faith, faithful, trustful, believing: – *śraddhā-vān*, adj. (f. -vatī), Having faith, trusting, believing: – *śraddhā-hūn*, adj. (f. -ā), Faithless, unbelieving: – *śraddhā-yukt*, adj. (f. -ā), Having faith, believing, trustful. (Platts 1884: 725). *viśvāsa*, s.m. Trust, confidence, faith, belief, reliance, dependence – *viśvāsa rakhnā*, *viśvāsa karnā* (-kā; or -par), To put trust (in), to confide (in), rely (on), to trust, believe, credit: – *viśvāsaḡhāt*, s.f. Destruction of confidence, breach of faith, violation of trust, treachery. (Platts 1884: 156).

feeling toward a human being or a personified deity.

Although he highlights a contrast between the two Sanskrit words, Hara observes however that they can be interrelated. In some systems of Hindu aesthetics, as in few passages of *San̄gītaratnākara* and *Rasataran̄giṇī*, *śraddhā* is considered a dormant instinct (an innate human nature to trust something) which, when stimulated by some particular event, naturally developed into the sentiment called *bhakti*, love, and devotion. It seems that

to have a devotional loving belief in another human being, the first step is to trust something objective in that other, to believe in his trustworthiness, the trustworthiness of his doctrine. Such a belief may grow into a passionate devotional belief in, or love of, him.  
– Hara 1964: 144-45

Hara gives further evidence for this relation between *bhakti* and *śraddhā* by quoting some parts of *Bhagavadgītā* where *bhakta* (the devotee) and the verb *bhaj-* appear together with *śraddhā* and its derivatives. In these examples *bhaktas*, those who have an emotional devotion to God, seem to be already furnished with *śraddhā*.

Likewise, the terms *viśvāsa* or *śraddhā* in the forms of religious reflexivity which we have encountered in Garhwal are used in close relation with the notion (employed in other moments in the same context) of *bhakti*.

To understand these references to *viśvāsa* and *śraddhā* in the sense of faith, trust, and devotion, it is useful to employ two of the categories which are proposed by scholars of Hinduism (Fuller 2004; Michaels 2005) to refer to different forms of Hindu religiosity: ritualism and devotionism. Without being mutually exclusive, these attitudes tend to be predominant in different practices within the same complex of Hinduism.

The term ritualism refers to a form of religiosity in which emphasis is put on the correct performance of the act and not on the feeling and belief of the performer. In ritualism, worship is informed by formal features which are rigidly codified, rather than

insistence on faith and feelings. Ritualism largely predominated in Vedic times. In the ideology of ancient Indian sacrifice, which was the pillar of Vedic religion and which also affects many forms of contemporary Hindu religious practice, Vedic text was spoken by persons authorized to do so, in an unchanged formulation, in a proper intonation, with the proper meter. While small errors could lead to failure, the correct execution of a sacrifice would mechanically bear the expected results. As expressed by Malamoud in reference to ancient India, he who offers a sacrifice correctly is entitled to expect as due the result he aimed for when proceeding with his oblation (1994: 137). This was the meaning of the word *śraddhā* in ritual contexts during the Vedic period: the “confidence” in the efficacy of the ritual, based on the idea that the rite, if executed correctly, provides credit in the eyes of the deities and motivates counter-gifts in return.<sup>16</sup>

This ritualism still informs nowadays many practices, both domestic and public, which are based on the Vedic–Brahmanic tradition. These practices include high and low traditional temple ritualism and caste ritualism. Some contemporary examples of ritualism are, as observed by Michaels (2005: 235-59), the early morning ritual, performed daily by many Hindus; the regular worship of a deity through invocations and gifts called *pūjā*; and the different forms of sacrifice performed at home as well as in public spaces.

On the other hand, the term devotionism refers to a form of religion which does not “demand sacrifice, ritualism or knowledge so much as heart, poetry, musicality or dance” (ibid.: 23). Devotional elements started to be adopted into Brahmanic–Sanskritic Hindu practice with the development of the *bhakti* movements. These

<sup>16</sup> Malamoud (1994) bases his observations on the notion of sacrifice-generated credit for men and debit for deities on two excerpts: *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB. I.1.2.19) and *Ṛk Saṁhitā* (ṚS VIII.32.16). For more information about the meanings of the term *śraddhā* in the Sanskrit texts, see Hara (1964) and Benveniste (1969).

movements, which spread in the south of India starting from the seventh century and in the north starting from twelfth-thirteenth century, commonly shared a feature by which the relationship between the devotee and the deity was thoroughly different to that of sacrificial ritualism. The contractual relationship between the deity and the worshipper, typical of Vedic sacrifice, was now substituted with a relationship based on trust, love, and desire for fusion with the deity. This form of religious attitude is not only found in the scriptures of *bhakti* movements but also, as Michaels (2005) states, in many local religious practices. Possession cults are among the practices of popular religion which are often strongly imbued of devotionism. Being based on the idea of the immediacy of the relationship between deity and devotee, they are indeed characterized often by devotional idioms, themes, and practices (Dumont 1966; Berti 2001; Bindi 2009). In parallel, Frederick Smith (2006: 345) highlighted how the notion of possession is frequently present in devotional literature (*bhakti*) and in particular in texts of the Vallabhācārya tradition and writings by Jīva and Rūpa Gosvāmī, two major disciples of Śrī Caitanya. The notion of possession (referred to as *āveśa* in these contexts) is used in reference to the deity and his attributes which penetrate and invade the devotee's person. It is applied in relation to the worshipper who, through his own devotion, gradually merges with and becomes part of the deity. It serves also to indicate the intensity of the devotee's spiritual commitment required to attain the state of total psychological and emotional immersion associated to being in direct contact with his deity.<sup>17</sup>

Many Garhwali mediums declare having a special and unique relationship with deities. They have been chosen by a deity and they need to maintain an intimate and privileged relation with this deity. The possibility to continue to be possessed rests on this relationship itself. Moreover, possessed mediums in Garhwal emphasize on

<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Smith also emphasized how the authors of Tamil devotional poetry also often used the term *aruḷ* which relates to the notion of possession (2006: 350).

several occasions during the sessions the need for the devotee to let go, to abandon himself, to trust, to place his hope in the deity standing before him.

These are the words used during a divinatory session by the oracle (*Mātājī*), possessed by local goddess Jwalpa Devī, to ask to her worshippers for more devotional attitude rather than a correct practice of cult. Devotees are requested to place their total trust in the deity:

*Mātājī*: I do not want anything other than your devotion (*bhakti*)... I don't belong to any particular home. I only go to places where proper *dharma* (the socio-moral order), *puṇya* (actions which conform with the socio-moral order and produce merit) and pure minds (*śuddha citta*). . . I am always the one protecting you. I am with you twenty-four hours a day. I offer you all well-being (*kalyāṇa*).

Girl: When we have problems we never go to someone else.

*Mātājī*: I am always with you. Of course, I can't betray my children. As long as you have a prayer in my name, nothing will happen to you. Nothing will happen to you.

– Jwalpa Devī, séance recorded in December 2006

The centrality of devotion in possession cult and the importance of ritualism in Vedic-Brahmanic ritual practices explain how the strategies of justification for ritual failures are, in Garhwal, very diverse for different kinds of rituals.<sup>18</sup> Failures of healing rituals are almost never justified with the idea of a mistake in their execution. Conversely this notion, which was one of the most frequent reasons used to account for ritual failure in Vedic times, is still used in

<sup>18</sup> Within the chapters of *Mīmāṃsāśāstra*, several authors, such as Kumārila and Prabhākara, offer different possible explanations to the problem of the failure of ritual to bear the expected results (Halbfass 1991; Freschi 2013). I thank Elisa Freschi for her stimulating thoughts and invitation to look with comparative eyes to classical justifications to ritual failures. I also thank Federico Squarcini for his precious remarks on the subject of this paper.



relation to Vedic–Brahmanic rituals. In such rituals, this conception of misexecution is still nowadays accompanied by the necessity to perform specific rituals of expiation (*prāyaścitta*) to repair ritual mistakes (Kane 2006; McClymond 2011).

### The Productive Role of Scepticism

For a long time now, anthropologists have been speaking of the “beliefs” of the people they studied. Some approaches, as the intellectualist theory of religion whose main proponent was Robin Horton (1967), sustained that in “traditional societies”, as opposed to modern open and scientific societies, people adhere in a simple, conservative, and unreflexive way to their beliefs. Such traditional societies would have a closed system of thought which has a self-confirming quality and is unaware of alternatives to established tenets. This approach, however, has been largely criticized. In 1969 the psychoanalyst O. Mannoni published a famous paper “Je sais bien mais quand même” which centres on the ambivalence of every act of believing and on the fact that one belief can be abandoned and kept at the same time. In 1972 Rodney Needham (1972) noticed how the term “belief”, in addition to not having an exact correspondence in many languages, is itself quite ambiguous and inherently implies the notion of doubt. Such suggestions were welcomed by many anthropologists who have shown how ambivalence and doubt are part of religious practices and beliefs (Favret-Saada 1977; Lenclud 1990; Pouillon 1993; Hamayon 1997; Luhrmann 1989; Schlemmer 2009; and all the texts contained in the volume edited by Højbjerg in 2002a). Based on these studies, one could conclude that the kind of belief most commonly shared by humans, across places and time is perhaps a hybrid between trust and doubt.<sup>19</sup>

Ambivalent attitudes have been observed not only in relation to the faith in deities but also in relation to other two kinds of belief: belief in the truthfulness of possession and belief in the honesty of

mediums and other specialists. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958) and Pierre Smith (1982), have described possession cults and initiation rituals which rest on a fundamental uncertainty based on a half-believed fiction that some unseen supernatural event really happens as they are performed. According to Jane Atkinson (1989), working on Indonesian shamanism, this uncertainty is stronger in performance-centred than in liturgy-centred rituals. The distinction between liturgy-centred and performance-centred rituals was proposed (*ibid.*: 14-15) to emphasize the difference between rituals with a strictly-defined process and those giving relative freedom and flexibility to ritual actors. The latter, of which possession cults are an example, could be analysed as a repertoire of ritual actions available to performers acting independently in the ritual arena. Such events are never regarded as unproblematic and often people have towards them an attitude of relative trust, which is always open to scepticism.

Many of these authors demonstrate how scepticism is not only an element present “despite belief” but is a necessary resource of religious practice and belief. Julien Bonhomme (2005) has shown how among the Bwete people of Gabon scepticism is an internal mechanism of ritual which, built inside religious practice, contributes to its efficacy: by “trapping” the person who undergoes divination and healing, scepticism allows the ritual re-shaping of the person’s relation to himself and with others. In other cases, forms of scepticism have been shown to be crucial to the continuity of ritual systems in contexts of social and political change. Christian Højbjerg (2002c) shows how the element of reflexivity, which is intrinsic to ritual performances, explains the resistance by the Guinean Loma religion against the state authorities’ deliberate attempts to extirpate it following the independence of the Republic of Guinea in 1958. According to Højbjerg, people who worship figurative representations of their deities are inherent iconoclasts and are aware of the paradox of having living kinds becoming artefacts, and vice versa. They are therefore to some extent immune

<sup>19</sup> For an example concerning mythology in ancient Greece, see P. Veyne 1983.

to acts of desecration from outsiders.

Similarly, in Garhwal, people's attitude toward spiritual entities and rituals of possession is a sentiment filled with ambivalence: a hybrid of trust and doubt. The continuous incitement to trust given by the deities' mediums to the people who come to consult them should be understood in this light. There are indeed not one but three kinds of trust which need to be continuously reconsolidated by discourses and practices. (i) The first kind refers to the fact of believing in deities and in their existence combined with faith that they will help those who worship them; (ii) the second kind concerns the power of deities to effectively possess local mediums in order to intervene in human affairs; and (iii) the third form of belief relates to the person of the medium him/herself: the belief in a genuine truthfulness of the possession of a specific medium within the context of a séance of possession. Though the three kinds of belief are interconnected, they are not quite equivalent. It is not rare to meet people who affirm having strong faith in local deities but do not believe in the fact that deities can possess people and give divination and healing.<sup>20</sup>

There are also cases of people who actively trust mediums but do not believe that they can be possessed during the entire time of a possession séance. These mediums are said to be genuinely possessed only for a short time during the performance of possession, be it a healing ritual or a divination séance. The rest of the time, they are considered to be simulating possession.<sup>21</sup>

And there are people who say that they only trust some mediums but not others, which are considered as being acting and faking possession.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with the general physician Dr. Rana, Uttarkashi, January 2014.; the paediatrician Dr. Chandola, Dehradun, January 2014; the surgeon Dr. Chué, Uttarkashi, January 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the local journalist Unyal, Purola, January 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with the 30-years old Prahalad Bhatnagar (Uttarkashi, December 2013).

These multiple possibilities of doubt allow justifying ritual failures. As a consequence, they constitute in Garhwal, as in other ethnographic contexts, productive resources which contribute to the preservation of the ritual system.

Nevertheless, the Garhwali example provides evidence that not only doubting but also denouncing other people' doubt can become an important resource which allows the efficacy and continuity of rituals.

### Conclusive Remarks: Containing Scepticism

Despite their productive features and being integral to religious practice, forms of reflexivity could bring the system to collapse were it not for some specific mechanisms restraining doubt from overcoming certain determined agreeable limits. Such mechanisms are needed in order to let doubt exist within certain bounds, while preserving the system from extreme scepticism which would bring it to an end.

Garhwalis' explanation to ritual failures which have been analysed in this article offers an example of such mechanisms. Although other forms of explanation to the inefficacy of healing and divination rituals are sometimes employed in Garhwal, this limited focus is justified by the fact that forms of explanation which, in different ways, denounce doubt, are among the most spread explanations to ritual failure. Moreover these explanations deserve special attention because they constitute an important form of reflexivity, which can be termed *meta-reflexivity*. Indeed they are at the same time commentaries *about ritual*, which explain its eventual inefficacy and commentaries *about ritual reflexivity*.

In some cases, as in the discourse involving biomedicine, it can be hypothesized that these justifications result from recent transformative trends and have developed as a consequence of the many cultural and social anxieties which, over the last fifty years, have come to span across the local context. Such accounts provide answers to new forms of uncertainty linked to social

changes occurring at the local and trans-local levels. These changes mainly relate to the widespread processes of transformation and the associated changing social status of the different existing healing methods (Bindi 2012). Meta-reflexivity on ritual failure then becomes a powerful means for this healing system to maintain its own legitimacy in a context of increasingly diverse and competing healing techniques. In other cases, such as the first two discourses analysed (the changing identity of deities or their vindictive attitude when reciprocity is missing), which both invoke the lack of belief as a cause, doubt appears as being intrinsically rooted in the system itself rather than stemming from resistance to biomedical hegemony or any demystifying “modern” scientific thought.

On the one hand, the forms of meta-reflexivity addressed throughout this paper demonstrate how the practice of denouncing doubt can serve a productive use and become a useful resource to justify ritual failures. Notions of faith/devotion/belief and doubt/lack of faith are mobilized to create sense and to encompass ritual inefficacy within this system of representations. They become useful to preserve this system against eventual voids of meaning resulting from ritual inefficacy.

On the other hand, these ways of reasoning which assess the existence of reflexive attitudes such as doubt and scepticism contribute to denounce them and contain them within acceptable limits.

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